¿*Hijos de la Chingada*?: Octavio Paz's "The Labyrinth of Solitude" and National Identity in Mexico and Peru

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In "The Labyrinth of Solitude," Octavio Paz takes it upon himself to explain the Mexican national character. "The history of Mexico," he argues, "is the history of man seeking his parentage, his origins."[1] According to Paz, the Mexican, feeling separated from his origins, lives fundamentally in solitude. Paz discusses the nature of the Mexican, characterizing him as a Spaniard-indigenous hybrid in denial of his violent ancestry.[2] Paz admits, however, that his reflection concerns only the relatively small group of people who identify themselves as Mexicans. This essay will examine the works of various historians of Mexico, revealing that a large number of indigenous peoples throughout Mexican history have indeed considered Mexicans to be 'others,' rather than identifying with them as part of the same cultural group. In turn, many Mexicans have excluded indigenous communities from their Mexican national identity, perceiving these indigenous peoples as 'others.' Thus, as Paz admits, his characterization of the Mexican only applies to part of Mexico's population. However, Paz argues that all peoples in Mexico can *become* Mexican. Here, he fails to acknowledge the strength of Mexico's divisions; in fact, in order for all indigenous peoples to self-identify as Mexicans, Paz's definition of the Mexican must be broadened significantly. Although it is argued here that Mexico is fundamentally divided culturally, the case of Peru—a country with a very different past in terms of indigenous-colonial relations—will put Mexico's situation into perspective. An examination of some works of historians of Peru will reveal that that country is

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[1] Octavio Paz, "The Labyrinth of Solitude," in *The Labyrinth of Solitude and Other Writings*, trans. L. Kemp, Y. Milos and R. Phillips Belash (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1985), 20.
[2] In this essay, Octavio Paz's Mexican will be referred to as male ('him') because this is the way in which Paz himself refers to 'the Mexican.'

significantly—and sadly—more racially divided than Mexico, making Peruvian unity a near impossibility. Paz's prediction of Mexican unity under Mexican identity is certainly more probable than Peruvian unity; however, this does not negate the fact that Paz's definition of the Mexican does not allow for the inclusion of the country's entire population into its national culture.

In his fourth chapter, "The Sons of Malinche," Paz analyzes an expression of emotion and Mexicanism: "¡Viva México, hijos de la chingada!" "Hijo de la chingada," he says, means "offspring of violation."[3] "Chingada" refers to Malinche, the violated mother of Mexico, an indigenous woman living during the Spanish conquest who became the mistress of Cortés, the *conquistador*. Paz refers to the Conquest as a violation, and Malinche as the symbol of violated indigenous women who were fascinated and seduced by the Spaniards into betraying their people. According to Paz, in shouting "¡Viva México, hijos de la chingada!" Mexicans "condemn [their] origins and deny [their] hybridism." The Mexican, Paz contends, repudiates Malinche, and thus "breaks his ties with the past, renounces his origins, and lives in isolation and solitude."[4] According to Paz, then, the Mexican is a hybrid by nature: he is an unorthodox blend of Spaniard and Indian, of violator and violated. He lives in solitude because he cannot come to terms with this ancestry, renouncing his hybridism and thus his true nature.

"The Mexican condemns all his traditions at once," says, Paz, "the whole set of gestures, attitudes and tendencies in which it is now difficult to distinguish the Spanish from the Indian."[5] Here, Paz suggests that Mexicans are so thoroughly a mixture of Spanish and Indian that neither ethnicity is any longer distinguishable; it is this hybridism that Mexicans renounce. He continues, "The Mexican does not want to be either an Indian or a Spaniard. Nor does he want to be descended from them… He becomes the son of Nothingness."[6] Thus, the Mexican renounces not only his hybridism, but his relation to either side of his ancestry. As he sees himself as neither Indian nor Spaniard, nor the

[3] Paz, "Labrynth of Solitude," 79.
[4] Ibid., 86-87.
[5] Ibid, 87.
[6] Ibid.

descendant of either, the Mexican is an orphan, and is consequently left without an identity, confused and alone.

For Paz, the Mexican is a single, confused entity. He is both Spanish and indigenous in truth, but refuses to acknowledge this ancestry. Paz's Mexican struggles with himself and his identity, but Mexico in fact is more divided than the man-with-identity-crisis metaphor allows. Indeed, Paz notes briefly near the beginning of "The Labyrinth of Solitude" that his discussion concerns only those who are conscious of themselves as Mexicans—a group, he says, which is quite small. This is most certainly the case: many indigenous, predominantly rural peoples in Mexico consider urban, mestizo Mexicans to be 'others,' and vice versa. Rather than an individual with an identity crisis, Mexico is more than one person, each with a distinct identity. Thus, as Paz suggests, his characterization of the Mexican does not apply to all those living within Mexico's borders.

The country's multiplicity arises from an ethnic divide that has been present since Mexico became a nation. In "Indian Communities and Ayuntamientos in the Mexican Huasteca: Sujeto Revolts, Pronunciamientos and Caste War," Michael T. Ducey discusses the effects of Mexican Independence and the new 1812 constitution of Cádiz upon two indigenous communities in the states of Hidalgo and Veracruz. During the colonial period, says Ducey, the Spanish colonizers conceded some degree of autonomy to indigenous communities by allowing them to create their own native governments called *repúblicas de indios*. The new constitution replaced the républicas with *ayuntamientos*—municipal governments which Ducey refers to as "ethnically blind."[7] However, the state failed to set from the beginning how the new municipal governments were to function, and the indigenous peoples harboured a "tenacious attachment to local political traditions." Consequently, Ducey contends, the républicas continued to function despite their lack of legal existence.[8]

Ducey demonstrates that these two communities learned to use the promises of the new constitution to protest local officials' attempts to maintain

[7] Michael T. Ducey, "Indian Communities and Ayuntamientos in the Mexican Huasteca: Sujeto Revolts, Pronunciamientos and Caste War," *The Americas* 57:4 (2001): 528.
[8] Ducey, "Indian Communities and Ayuntamientos in the Mexican Huasteca," 531.

the colonial labour draft after Independence.[9] Thus, indigenous peasants in these communities were able to defend their interests in the face of threats and retain their relative autonomy despite new laws attempting to revoke it. The fact that these people desired to keep their community semi-autonomous even after Independence suggests that, although no longer dominated by Spain, Mexico was not really *theirs*. They still either perceived themselves and their communities to be separate from the state, or felt that the state failed to incorporate their own unique indigenous identities. Furthermore, Ducey's thesis statement is illuminating: "The objective of this paper is to explore the *fate* of indigenous communities under the new system and how Indians *manipulated* it in order to survive." [10] The new constitution was not perceived as a great feat expressing the identities and ideologies of these indigenous peoples—it had nothing to do with their identity. The new constitution was not theirs in any profound sense, but was something to be dealt with and manipulated in order to survive. Ducey's article suggests that the people of these indigenous communities did not consider themselves to be part of the Mexican nation, but rather people with a separate identity under the umbrella of a Mexican administration.

Like Ducey's article, Alexander Dawson's *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico* illustrates a division between indigenous identity and otherwise Mexican identity, but a century later and from the point of view of those who perceive themselves to be Mexicans. Dawson examines post-Revolutionary *Indigenistas*, who, "[r]ejecting the Europhilic traditions of the past…turned their attention to the Indian, both as the symbol of the national type and the object of reform." These people sympathized with indigenous peoples, striving to incorporate them into modern Mexico.[11] However, Dawson argues that the Indigenista perception of indigenous peoples was not necessarily entirely respectful: "Indigenistas were not engaged in studying and preserving a disappearing other, but were instead trying to facilitate the disappearance of the other."[12] Evidently, indigenous peoples were seen not as Mexicans, but as 'others' living within Mexico's borders who should be incorporated into the

[9] Ducey, "Indian Communities and Ayuntamientos," 534.
[10] Ibid, 525. Emphasis mine.
[11] Alexander S. Dawson, *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2004), xiv-xv.
[12] *Ibid.*, xviii-xix.

nation, thereby *becoming* Mexicans. Dawson contends that the Indigenistas succeeded to the extent that they helped to ensure a lengthy single party hegemony. However, he also notes that "[the Indigenistas'] power was limited by a national context in which the word *Indian* would remain for the most part a racial slur…"[13] Thus, despite attempts to incorporate indigenous peoples into Mexican society, to some extent, these people remained 'others' in the eyes of Mexicans.

Mary Kay Vaughan's *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* examines another attempt to transform people living within Mexico's borders into modern 'Mexicans.' Vaughan discusses the role of Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) educational policy in the states of Puebla and Sonora during the 1930s. The SEP aimed to build a national culture by way of education, with teachers acting as cultural ideologues and political organizers for people living in rural communities.[14] Vaughan examines four specific areas, one of which is the Yaqui Valley in Sonora. The Yaquis, says Vaughan, viewed themselves as vastly different from Mexicans, and thus did not respond favourably to SEP education. President Lázaro Cárdenas granted state resources to the Yaquis, which allowed them to preserve the ethnic autonomy they desired. Vaughan asserts that this settlement with the state "produced new linkages, identities and empowerments that implied membership in the Mexican nation."[15] Nevertheless, since the Yaquis used these linkages in order to preserve their cultural autonomy as much as possible, one might question whether this implied membership in the Mexican nation, or only in Mexican political structure. Vaughan states that the Yaquis began to use the state-run schools after 1960, and that the first generation of university-educated Yaqui leadership appeared by the 1990s. However, she also notes that though the Yaquis accommodated cultural change, they also maintained their identity and continued to believe in their own cultural superiority.[16]

There are strong similarities between the case of the Yaquis and that of the post-Independence communities studied by Ducey, the members of which

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[13] Dawson, *Indian and Nation in Revolutionary Mexico*, 153.
[14] Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 29-30.
[15] *Ibid*, 138.
[16] *Ibid,* 161.

used the new constitution without identifying with the Mexican nation. Yaquis accepted state resources and eventually education, but used these for the purpose of preserving their unique culture and defending their interests as a semi-autonomous entity. They became politically connected to the Mexican state, but still identified themselves as culturally superior to Mexicans. Mexicans had laws and political structures that were useful, but they were still 'others.'

Thomas Benjamin's "A Time of Reconquest: History, the Maya Revival, and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas" reveals that a large gap still existed between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in Mexico as late as the 1990s. Benjamin discusses the emergence of a new Maya historiography in the state of Chiapas written by the indigenous peoples themselves, counteracting the commonly-held notion that the Mayas were a people without a history. They were considered to be without a history firstly because Chiapan Mayas traditionally had not written down their history, and secondly because all existing Maya history had been written by Mexican, European and North American historians rather than the Mayas themselves. An Indian revitalization movement emerged in the 1970s and 1980s throughout Mexico and the Americas, encouraging cultural vitality and activism. Part of this revival, says Benjamin, was the writing of indigenous history by indigenous peoples. The resulting Chiapan historiography, encouraged by rebel groups such as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and written by Mayas, "rejects the long dominant historical perspective that denied indigenous resistance to domination and exploitation." It also "presents the Maya as protagonists, not passive victims in the past, promotes a pan-Maya identity in the present, and places the Maya in the national story that is Mexican history."[17] Benjamin refers to the history championed by the EZLN as "historical syncretism combining national and indigenous history."[18]

Thus, the objective was (and is—the EZLN is still active today) to make Maya history a part of Mexican history. There is a desire to be culturally incorporated into Mexico, but not by the removal of indigenous identity. Rather, the aim is for distinctive Maya historical perceptions to be heard, and considered

[17] Thomas Benjamin, "A Time of Reconquest: History, the Maya Revival, and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas," *The American Historical Review* 105:2 (2000): 422-423.
[18] Ibid., 447.

as part of Mexico's history. To some extent, these new Maya historians must consider themselves Mexicans, if this incorporation is one of their goals. However, the fact that there is a "Maya history" separate from "Mexican history" is illuminating—Maya history is considered by both Mexicans and Mayas themselves to be largely distinct from predominant Mexican history in its focus upon Maya identity and Maya protagonists. The Indian revitalization movement acknowledged that Mayas were not the same as other Mexicans, and sought to celebrate this cultural difference. The desire to intertwine Maya and Mexican history is not an expression of pride in mainstream Mexican culture, but of Maya uniqueness. Evidently, the Chiapan Mayas consider themselves to be culturally distinct from Mexicans.

Benjamin begins his article with a description of a 1992 indigenous protest march in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. The protesters knocked down the statue of Diego de Mazariegos, a Spanish conquistador and founder of the colonial city: "After surviving five centuries of systemic violence and exploitation, the natives of the highlands of Chiapas destroyed the premier symbol of their oppression."[19] Paz characterizes the Spanish conquest as a violation, and it is evident that the San Cristóbal protesters would agree—as Benjamin notes, they consider the conquistador Mazariegos to be a symbol of oppression, not of the birth of a nation. However, Paz also characterizes the Mexican as one who does not want to be Indian or Spanish, claiming that in all Mexican gestures, attitudes and tendencies, it is impossible to distinguish between the Spanish and the Indian. Clearly, this characterization does not apply to the indigenous protesters who knocked down the statue of Mazariegos. They identify themselves as indigenous and feel attached to this indigenous ancestry. As a result, there is a belief in the need to defend them from the presence of a statue idolizing their oppressor, exploiter and violator. They distinguish themselves from the Spanish conquerors as descendants of the 'Indians,' not of the Spanish violation of Malinche. Therefore, these indigenous protestors do not fit Paz's definition of the Mexican.

In light of the above sources, Paz's observation that those who consider themselves to be Mexicans make up a rather small group is correct; indeed, his characterization of the Mexican as a single, confused entity, born of hybridity

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[19] Benjamin, "A Time of Reconquest," 422-423.

and in denial of this ancestry, does not apply to all those living in Mexico. From Independence to the 1990s, groups of people in Mexico have considered peoples within the same borders to be 'others'—in other words, not everyone in Mexico self-identifies as belonging to the same Mexican cultural group. Indigenous peoples have perceived themselves, and have been perceived as, separate and distinct from Mexicans. Thus, while Mexico is to some extent the product of contact between 'Indians' and Spaniards, to conceive of every person in Mexico as a hybrid in denial is incorrect; rather, as Paz acknowledges, his characterization only applies to part of the country's population.

Paz argues that those who identify themselves as Mexicans are "shaping the country more and more into their own image." Moreover, he says, they are increasing in number: "They are conquering Mexico. We can all reach the point of knowing ourselves to be Mexicans."[20] Indeed, although a definite tendency exists in Mexico for indigenous peoples to define themselves, and be defined as, different from Mexicans on the whole, there have been efforts by the state to increase the number of self-identifying Mexicans. Not all communities responded to *indigenismo* and SEP education as the state expected, and whether or not it is appropriate for the state to 'modernize' and integrate indigenous communities is debatable, but at least an effort was made in Mexico to create a unified national culture. Indeed, Vaughan's examination of 1930s SEP schooling is predominantly positive—she argues that SEP teachers and rural communities largely worked together to construct political linkages and organizations that would both connect the communities to the state and empower them politically. Her conclusions do not always suggest that the communities achieved the level of integration and modernization the state might have hoped for—as is especially evident with the Yaqui case—but the attempt at cultural unification and the successful creation of political linkages is nonetheless significant.

Even so, although Paz recognizes that not all within Mexico's borders are the same, he fails to acknowledge fully the extent of Mexico's multiplicity. It is not necessarily the case that all peoples in Mexico can come to consider themselves Mexicans—at least, not under Paz's definition of "Mexican." According to Vaughan, SEP education made unifying gains not so much by imposing Mexican culture upon communities, as by allowing communities to

[20] Paz, "The Labyrinth of Solitude," 12.

help create a language of consent and dissent for themselves. Key is the fact that this creation was mutual, not imposed.[21] In order to incorporate these communities into the modern Mexican political structure, certain cultural concessions had to be made—especially for peoples like the Yaquis. The Maya historians discussed by Benjamin desired incorporation into Mexico, but as members of their own, unique culture. They desired acknowledgement of the legitimacy of their distinct Maya history. They wanted their history to be Mexican, but Mexican in that it is Maya. If Mexican identity is as characterized by Paz—a Spanish-indigenous hybrid in denial—then these Maya historians can never truly be Mexican. They do not deny their indigenous ancestry, and purposefully distinguish this ancestry from the Spanish conquistadores. If they are to become Mexicans, then that nationality must allow room for simultaneous self-identification as indigenous. Vaughan illustrates that incorporation into Mexico truly works only when concessions are made; if all indigenous peoples are to identify as Mexican, then Paz's definition must become more elastic. Paz contends that "[t]he Indian blends into the landscape until he is an indistinguishable part of the white wall against which he leans…"[22] However, such passivity should not necessarily be assumed of Mexico's indigenous peoples; evidently, not all of them will so easily give up their cultural identity in order to fit Paz's definition of the Mexican.

As much as Mexico is characterized by an ethnic multiplicity whose strength Paz does not entirely acknowledge, racial divides within Peruvian society are significantly more impenetrable. In *Smoldering Ashes: Cuzco and the Creation of Republican Peru, 1780-1840*, Charles F. Walker examines Peru's transition from colonial state to independent republic, devoting a chapter to the fate of the indigenous peoples during and after this transition. He argues that almost immediately after Independence, the Peruvian state forewent liberal notions of universal rights as citizens, opting instead to restore colonial relations with indigenous peoples. Colonial attitudes towards indigenous peoples were retained, as well: "Local and regional authorities in the Andes...depict[ed] Indians as uncivilized others who required the heavy hand of the state to contribute to

[21] Vaughan, "Cultural Politics in Revolution," 196.
[22] Paz, "The Labyrinth of Solitude," 43.

the nation and possibly to be considered Peruvians."[23] The indigenous peoples solidified this divide between 'Indians' and 'non-Indians' by doing everything in their power to retain their autonomy. Thus, the actions and attitudes of the state and indigenous population implied a distinct difference between 'Indian' and 'non-Indian'—they perceived one another as the 'other.' Their actions, Walker asserts, had profound implications for the unity of Peru: "The gulf between caudillo and peasant politics and the relative success of Indians in defending their resources ultimately reinforced the notion of Peru as a racially divided nation." He notes that this colonial attitude quickly became widespread, as the "vision of Indians as inferiors made its way into national and regional circles."[24] Thus, according to Walker, Peru was racially divided from the moment of its inception.

Marisol de la Cadena's *Indigenous Mestizos: The Politics of Race and Culture in Cuzco, 1919-1991* paints a particularly bleak picture of more recent race relations in Peru. She examines perceptions of what it means to be 'Indian' or 'mestizo' for Peruvians, and discovers severe social stigmas attached to 'Indian' identity. Like in Mexico, indigenismo movements occurred in Peru, but with far more dire consequences. Many Peruvian Indigenistas during the 1920s "defined Indians as a racially deformed group." They defended 'Indians' on the basis that they were redeemable, since their Inca race and empire had been great before the conquest. This indigenismo, says de la Cadena, "confirmed for modernity that Indians were an inferior racial/cultural type undeserving of Peruvian citizenship…"[25] The notion of inferiority of the 'Indian,' as discussed by Walker, was continually reinforced in Peru by these Indigenistas and the population at large. The result was a definition of the 'Indian' so negative that indigenous peoples seeking an empowered identity avoided referring to themselves as 'Indians,' instead often opting for class-based terms like 'compañero.'[26] Thus, de la Cadena would suggest that Peru is fundamentally split between 'Indians' and

[23] Charles Walker, *Smoldering Ashes: Cuzco and the Creation of Republican Peru, 1780-1840* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 220.
[24] *Ibid*, 221.
[25] Marisol de la Cadena, *Indigenous Mestizos: The Politics of Race and Culture in Cuzco, Peru, 1919-1991* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 40-41.
[26] *Ibid*, 311.

'non-Indians.'[27] 'Indians,' supposedly primitive and undeserving of citizenship, are not considered Peruvians at all. This notion is so pervasive and deeply ingrained that the very term 'Indian' has come to have derogatory connotations. Evidently, the split between racial 'others' in Peru is devastatingly great.

Most discussions of indigenous peoples in Peru—including de la Cadena's book—concern peoples considered to be Andean, from the highlands and mountains. In *Salt of the Mountain: Campa Asháninka History and Resistance in the Peruvian Jungle*, however, Stefano Varese instead examines the even more secluded and ignored Asháninka peoples of the jungle. Varese argues that, despite attempted missionary, explorative and commercial incursions, Asháninka society "has remained immutable in the face of foreign advance." They have largely been able to maintain their traditions, with a minimum of community disintegration.[28] The Asháninka, says Varese, were mostly free of white penetration until the eighteenth century, at which time they gained an invented reputation for being "fearsome warriors completely lacking in humanitarian behaviour…" Thus, a "black legend" was born, in which the Asháninka were commonly perceived as immoral savages. Varese notes that this legend continued to pervade Peruvian thought into the "present day" (Varese was writing during the 1960s).[29] Considering they did everything possible to retain their independence from invading whites, and apparently largely succeeded, the Asháninka unquestionably consider themselves to be distinctly different from white or mestizo Peruvians—or even Andean 'Indians.' Peruvians on the whole evidently consider these people to be 'others,' in an exceedingly derogatory sense. Thus, Varese illustrates that the split in Peru between 'others' is even greater than de la Cadena suggests. As if the Andean 'Indians' were not discriminated against and segregated enough, the Asháninka case adds an additional level to Peru's exceedingly divided nature.

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[27] It should be noted that, according to de la Cadena, it is difficult to identify who is considered 'Indian' in Peru. The derogatory connotations of the term have apparently lead to enormously complex systems for defining who is 'Indian,' and not all Peruvians would agree as to who belongs to what ethnic category.

[28] Stefano Varese, *Salt of the Mountain: Campa Asháninka History and Resistance in the Peruvian Jungle* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 36-37.

[29] *Ibid*, 110.

Compared to the Peruvian case, Mexico's internal divisions appear minute and insignificant. Peruvian national identity seems impossible to define. A true national identity requires a sense of unity as a nation, but it is evident that this does not exist in Peru; the Asháninka are barely considered to be of the same species as other peoples living in Peru, let alone the same national identity. As previously discussed, in Mexico, certain attempts have been made by the state to incorporate all within the country's borders into a national culture. Peruvian indigenous communities evidently experienced no such attempts; instead, they retained colonial-style ethnic relations wherein 'Indians' and 'non-Indians' were perceived as two fundamentally different types of people. Nevertheless, though Mexico unquestionably suffers less from racial divisions than Peru, the divisions of the former remain. Mexico is more unified than Peru, but still nowhere near truly unified.

Peru is harshly divided by race, preventing the formation of a national identity. Until the stigma attached to indigenousness is removed, Peruvian unity will likely be impossible. It is a problem of definition—in Peru, to be 'Indian' is to be miserable and/or savage, and inherently un-Peruvian. Mexico suffers far less from racial divisions, but they nevertheless exist. Here too, it is a problem of definition, if Paz's characterization of the Mexican is taken to be the true definition of this identity. Paz acknowledges—quite correctly—that his analysis of the Mexican does not apply to the whole of Mexico. He insists that all within the country can become Mexicans, but if Paz's characterization of the Mexican is used, the country's indigenous peoples will never be Mexicans—they require a more elastic national definition that acknowledges their indigenous identity. Reviewer Irving A. Leonard expresses high regard for Paz's essay: "Clearly *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is designed to enhance the understanding of its readers, be they specialists or laymen in Hispanic American and Mexican studies, and it should be required reading."[30] However, in light of Mexico's racial history, it is difficult to recommend "The Labyrinth of Solitude" as required reading for laymen, unless they also plan to read about indigenous peoples in Mexico. Paz's admittance that he has discussed only part of Mexico's population is brief, and indigenous peoples are barely mentioned throughout the rest of the essay. As

[30] Irving A. Leonard, "Review: The Labyrinth of Solitude," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 42 (1962): 600.

such, reading "The Labyrinth of Solitude" as a sole guide to the nature of Mexico could be misleading. An uninformed reader might come to think that indigenous cultures existed only in the distant past, or that Mexico is a homogenous entity—and that would be a severe mistake.