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Seen and Heard in Mexico

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Seen and Heard in Mexico

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Seen and Heard in Mexico

Children and Revolutionary Cultural Nationalism

ELENA JACKSON ALBARRÁN

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To Noel Lewis

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations . . .	ix
Acknowledgments . . .	xiii
Introduction: Seen and Heard in Revolutionary Mexico . . .	1
1. Constructing Citizens: Adult-Produced Science, Space, Symbolism, and Rhetoric for the Revolutionary Child . . .	31
2. <i>Pulgarcito</i> and Popocatépetl: Children's Art Curriculum and the Creation of a National Aesthetic . . .	75
3. A Community of Invisible Little Friends: Technology and Power in Children's Radio Programs . . .	129
4. <i>Comino vence al Diablo</i> and Other Terrifying Episodes: Teatro Guiñol's Itinerant Puppet Theater . . .	175
5. <i>Hacer Patria</i> through Peer Education: Literacy, Alcohol, and the Proletarian Child . . .	213
6. <i>Hermanitos de la Raza</i> : Civic Organizations and International Diplomacy . . .	267
Conclusion: Exceptional and Everyday Citizens . . .	319
Notes . . .	329
Bibliography . . .	367
Index . . .	389

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. *El Universal*, February 1920 . . 39
2. A kindergarten class demonstrates their art, 1935 . . 42
3. “Proletarian children” demonstrate their manual labor abilities, 1935 . . 43
4. Girls decorating the walls of their school building, 1928 . . 51
5. Barber class, 1932 . . 53
6. Kindergarteners planting carrots, 1932 . . 54
7. Locally made playground equipment, 1932 . . 56
8. Locally made swing set, 1932 . . 57
9. *Pulgarcito* centerfold by Ramón Romero, 1931 . . 76
10. Best Maugard’s seven motifs, 1923 . . 85
11. Child’s drawing from Best Maugard’s *Método de Dibujo* . . 86
12. Advertisement for a local public bathhouse, 1926 . . 92
13. Mario Aburto’s winning contest entry and accompanying photograph, 1926 . . 94
14. Head shots of outstanding contributors, 1926 . . 95
15. Decorative drawing was deemed the stamp of “Mexicanness,” 1928 . . 100

16. Gendered differences in the streetcar-safety drawing contests, 1926 . . 103
17. Drawing by third grader Manuel Jiménez, 1926 . . 107
18. Self-portrait of a child engaged in drawing the volcanoes, 1926 . . 110
19. Student illustration of a history lesson, 1926 . . 111
20. Juan de Gracia and Dolores García next to their prizewinning entries, 1927 . . 119
21. Epifanio Flores and his international prize, 1929 . . 120
22. Children of various social classes gather with art education officials . . 127
23. Three Kings' Day ad for department store, 1926 . . 155
24. RCA ad featuring middle-class children, 1934 . . 156
25. Troka el Poderoso embodied multiple forms of technology . . 161
26. The elevator overpowers the staircase . . 166
27. Drawings submitted by a Troka listener, ca. 1930 . . 168
28. Illustration from Troka el Poderoso's story of the train penetrating the mountain . . 169
29. Children working on a Teatro Guiñol . . 181
30. A child's drawing of the Teatro Comino presentation of Teatro Guiñol, 1934 . . 201
31. A drawing of Comino and El Negrito beating the *patrón*, 1934 . . 202
32. An annotated drawing by a five-year-old of Comino and his grandmother . . 203
33. A younger child's drawing places the stage in the rural, natural setting, 1934 . . 206
34. An older child's drawing of Teatro Guiñol, 1934 . . 207
35. The drawing demonstrates a degree of spatial awareness . . 208

36. A child's drawing suggests the audience conditions at a typical performance . . 209
37. Photograph of audience at a Teatro Guiñol performance . . 210
38. Boy salutes flag, Tekax, Yucatán, 1931 . . 218
39. Student council of the Escuela Fronteriza Coahuila, ca. 1936 . . 223
40. Student officers' signatures for school committees, 1937 . . 230
41. Child handing out reading material to his peers, 1935 . . 239
42. Pages from *Alcoholismo* . . 246
43. Poster from the First Conference of the Proletarian Child, 1935 . . 253
44. Enrique Romero, speaking at the First Conference of the Proletarian Child . . 260
45. Anonymous child delegate, with emphasis on the girl's ethnicity . . 261
46. Mexico Child Welfare Bureau propaganda pamphlet . . 275
47. American children dressed in "typical" Mexican costume, 1941 . . 281
48. Advertisement in *Tihui* for Explorer supplies, 1927 . . 304
49. Mexican Boy Scouts in New York, during a visit to the World's Fair headquarters . . 308
50. Students enact a first-aid rescue, ca. 1932 . . 311

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Introduction

Seen and Heard in Revolutionary Mexico

My home is the Women's Penitentiary. I sleep on a woven mat on the floor. The clothing that I have is one pair of jeans, one cotton shirt, one jacket, and leather shoes. . . . The toys that I have I made myself at school: a grasshopper, a see-saw, a hobby horse, and a crocodile. I practice marbles, the harmonica, and the cup-and-ball. . . . My mother treats me well; she neither beats nor scolds me, and my teacher is kind, and I learn from her in a friendly and caring way. I am not satisfied with the way that I live.

—ENRIQUE GÓMEZ HERRERA, child autobiographer in Guanajuato, 1937

It takes a long time to become young.

—PABLO PICASSO, Cannes, France, 1966

Enrique Gómez Herrera awoke each morning on his straw mat on the floor of his mother's cell in the Women's Penitentiary in Guanajuato, where she was serving a twenty-year sentence for the murder of her older daughter's abusive husband.¹ Daily, Enrique bathed and dressed his younger sister and then donned his only set of clothes and set out from his prison home for school, where he attempted to integrate himself into a classroom of his peers. In an autobiographical essay solicited for a collection of Guanajuato schoolchildren's personal experiences, Enrique dutifully relayed the expected hallmarks of childhood: a catalog of his toys, his siblings, and the adults and institutions that shaped the contours of his young life. Despite the extreme circumstances that distinguished him from other children his age, he strained to provide a normal-

izing narrative of his life. His painful awareness of social difference coexisted, in this short excerpt, with an equally acute sense of the contemporary definition of a normal childhood in revolutionary Mexico. Unlike many other unfortunate children living unconventional lives in a time of growing national attention to children's well-being, Enrique's story saw public dissemination—not only as a contribution to the eighty-four-page anthology *Voces Nuevas* published in Guanajuato by former state education director Francisco Hernández y Hernández but also in excerpted form in a review for Mexico City's daily *El Universal Gráfico*.

That his plight interested anyone at all suggests an aperture, during the two decades following the Mexican Revolution, in which children gained consideration as viable social actors, cultural critics, and subjects of reform. During a period that scholars have come to define as a child-centered society, children became central to the reform agenda of the revolutionary nationalist government—and the recipients of the largest percentage of the national budget. Despite the rhetorical, sentimental, and material attention heaped upon children in the 1920s and 1930s, historians have a remarkably flimsy sense of how children themselves experienced and perceived the onslaught of resources and consideration. The reproduction of Enrique's story in the national press tugged at the public's heartstrings and confirmed the critical position of the article's author that questioned the leftist intellectual tendency to romanticize the proletarian classes, a waning fashion by the late 1930s. But it also serves as a document—imperfect, edited, and excerpted, to be sure, but a document nonetheless—that captures a moment in which a child took the time to evaluate his own living circumstances as compared to the national standard. Countless snippets of children's experiences culled from the archives in the form of letters, stories, scripts, drawings, interviews, presentations, marginalia, and homework assignments all attest not to the uniform Mexican childhood envisioned by revolutionary ideologues but rather to varied and uneven childhoods all formed against a monolithic backdrop of cultural nationalism.

The Symbolic Child and Real Children

National identity formation in modern Mexico took place in waves, and each wave resulted in the consolidation of a set of collective memories that more or less corresponded to generations. Since independence, official attempts to cobble together a set of national symbols, beliefs, images, and practices from the country's diverse population met with lukewarm public reception; in many cases, the spontaneous and streetwise popular versions of national identity that characterized festivals, parades, games, and entertainment corresponded more authentically to the visions that Mexicans had of themselves.² For children, the sensory power of animated dolls, voices emitted from an electrified box, and the hustle and bustle of bodies in parades and demonstrations contributes to a sense of collective identity more than the political affiliations and institutional memberships that adults use to organize themselves into social groups.

Alongside evolving discourse that signaled the symbolic child as a measure of the strength of nascent Mexico's heartbeat, real and living children thrived and languished along with the nation's sputtering welfare. Heeding the astute observations of sociologists of childhood, we would do well to attend to the rhetorical power of "the child," but not to confuse this singular device with the conditions and experiences of "children"; in most cases, political references to "the child" bore little resemblance to individual children's lives.³ As diverse and often disparate visions of the emerging nation competed, unifying symbols emerged to forge political peace. Appeals for the welfare of "the child" were among the earliest and most conciliatory. But official representations of the child often failed to materialize into programs and policies that would lead to the meaningful incorporation of real children into the nation-building project.⁴ At the core of this study lies an interrogation of the tension, historical and historiographical, between the symbolic child and the real child.

Since the independence era, officials relied increasingly on *tabula rasa* tropes of children as metaphors for constantly recon-

figured projections of the imagined nation. While the politics may have shifted, the child remained at the core of moral, religious, medical, and educational debates—a facile symbol of hope and regeneration recalled by Liberals and Conservatives, reformers and caudillos alike.⁵ Over the course of two centuries, cycles of war followed by national reconstruction yielded mounting efforts to define and institutionalize the abstract concepts of nation and citizenship. In particular, the expansion of public education during the period of Liberal rule known as the Restored Republic (1867–76) offers an instructive comparison to the decades examined here. Amid an environment still fraught with competing ideologies, the Liberal ruling elite identified young children as the source material for their nation-building project. The 1867 Law of Public Instruction undermined the persistent power of the church as a socializing agent by replacing religious education with “moral education” in Mexico City, a legislative coup quickly adopted by many states in the federalized education system. Although nineteenth-century Liberals had identified the desirable avenues for citizen building, and made the tentative first steps toward creating the institutions that would convey their project, not until the postrevolutionary years was the state able to transmit a comprehensive and uniform “idea of nation” to schoolchildren through a centralized educational system.⁶ Yet for much of the nineteenth century, while children enjoyed symbolic presence at the center of moral, religious, medical, and educational debates, a distinctly child-oriented popular culture did not emerge until 1870, with a rise in the publication of children’s books and magazines. Notably, the children’s magazine *La niñez ilustrada* (1873–75) sought to put enlightened ideas about child citizenship (as the “producer, reproducer, citizen, and soldier of tomorrow”) into the hands of middle- and upper-class children. Even then much of this Mexican children’s literature, though newly liberated from its Europhile roots, saw limited dissemination among the upper classes.⁷ Furthermore, the vast majority of child-oriented cultural production persisted in treating the child as a symbol of loftier political ideals or, at best, an object of socialization.

As early as the era of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911), emerging government discussions identified the child as an active citizen and resulted in educational policy reform. The *niño activo* was the twentieth-century heir of the Liberal-era *hombre positivo*, evidence of expanding definitions of Liberalism and democracy from the Constitution of 1857 to the Constitution of 1917. The medicalization of childhood and expansion of public health and hygiene initiatives during the Porfirian era helped to mobilize the child as the object of state concern. In particular, hygienists focused their energies on regulating conditions in the public schools, the physical conditions of which offended their sensibilities and jeopardized the auspicious developmental start to citizenship desired for Mexican children.⁸ Porfirian education implemented a positivist belief in the perfectibility of the population only in uneven fits and starts, as attested by historian Mílada Bazant. In some exceptional cases progressive teachers (public and private alike) implemented innovative pedagogical strategies designed to inspire political and social action among young children.⁹ In general, educational officials during the Porfiriato did strive to make curricular materials more appealing and age appropriate for their intended audiences, and textbook analyses of the time reveal a tendency to activate the child reader as a civic actor.¹⁰

Understandably, little information exists about the rhetorical treatment of and educational policies for children during the tumultuous years of the Mexican Revolution. During the decade-long upheaval, the rotating doors of Chapultepec Castle, the seat of the presidency, meant that little meaningful consolidation of ideas and practices about childhood took place. From Chihuahua to Guerrero, children from across the social spectrum were swept up as soldiers or camp followers, saw their families irrevocably broken apart, or were whisked away to exile. Resources were depleted, and modes of conveying them were disrupted. Childhood for many in this decade was defined by great deprivation, violence, prostitution, homelessness, and general lack of structural or institutional attention. An estimated 1.5 million Mexicans perished in the revolution that waged from 1910 to

1920, decimating the population and eliminating an entire generation of productive men of working age. By the time the conflict came to a close, these experiences amounted to a denial of childhood for a generation of Mexicans. During the 1920s and 1930s, then, the revolutionary officials set out to rectify this cultural gap and endeavored to reconstruct a nation divided by three decades of dictatorship and crippled by a decade of civil war. They sought to replace that generation with active citizens who supported the ideals documented in the forward-thinking Constitution of 1917, forged by constitutionalist delegates over arduously debated sessions in Querétaro.

Revolutionary-era lawmakers, professionals, and governors believed firmly in the possibility of constructing the ideal citizen from birth, through the balanced application of sound pedagogy, firm ideology, and modern medicine. The intellectual sector saw increasing importance assigned to children as the theme of various national and international conferences on children, most notably the Pan-American Child Congresses (Congresos Panamericanos del Niño). Viewed from above, the rhetorical and symbolic prominence of children in policy making seemed little more than an intensified continuation of positivist concerns for the health and hygiene of the national population.

But for a brief window of about twenty years from 1920 to 1940, and ranging in form and intensity, child-centered reforms accompanied a meaningful incorporation of children into political and civic culture. The revolutionary era offered new opportunities for the child to serve as an active member of society in his or her own right, and not simply as a future citizen. Both the governmental and the private sectors undertook a project of expanding the scope of childhood through the creation of new locations, activities, and media outlets. At the same time, as a result of the initial mission of the revolution to expand participation in the construction of the nation, young people from rural, poor, or indigenous backgrounds now, and for the first time, were recognized as children, whose modern childhood deserved the locations, activities, and media outlets that pressed into their communities.

The culture of childhood changed notably in these decades, in an evolution from the symbolic child to the actively engaged social citizen. Efforts transformed the role of the child from that of an individual bounded by the family to that of a member of the classroom, the community, the nation, and a transnational generation. The hallmarks of childhood presented in this study—puppet shows, radio, art curriculum, extracurricular organizations, and Pan-Americanism—gained nearly universal recognition as formative components of a cross-section of society. Children who participated in these new opportunities found themselves in a community that bisected the long-standing social categories of race, class, and gender and one that transcended geographic boundaries. Given the new, improved, and restored communications technologies that corresponded with this period, the resulting generation shared more cultural references than any one previous. Many children growing up in these optimistic years enjoyed unprecedented access to their peers through opportunities afforded by official educational initiatives, new and improved media technologies, and new forms of children's popular culture. Yet, as the following chapters will suggest, the officially produced model of the ideal child shifted from the 1920s to the 1930s, suggesting changing attitudes about the roles that children from different social and ethnic classes ought to play in revolutionary Mexico.

President Alvaro Obregón founded the Ministry of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública [SEP]) in 1921, and the various agencies within the burgeoning institution introduced many new forms of interaction and consumption to children. Revolutionary governments through this agency launched educational expenditures to an all-time high, averaging 10 percent of the budget from 1921 to 1940, reaching its apex during the Cárdenas administration at nearly 14 percent.¹¹ In its first years the SEP blossomed under the talented, ambitious José Vasconcelos, who served as secretary of education from 1921 to 1924 and pointed the agency in the direction it would take for two decades. Forging a unified society from diverse cultural or geographic groups began at the level

of rural education, where schoolteachers instilled the unifying concepts of patriotism and language.¹² Vasconcelos's successor, José Manuel Puig Casauranc (1924–28), exhorted schoolteachers to enjoy the privilege of working with children, whom he considered fresh, clean material not yet molded into the sad, contorted souls of adults.¹³ The dissemination of the revolutionary cultural nationalism espoused by Vasconcelos and fellow ideologues found fertile soil in the elementary classrooms popping up in the countryside.¹⁴

In the early 1920s the *indigenismo* that flooded creative and academic production in the intellectual spheres resulted in a primary school curriculum, intended largely for urban, middle-class schoolchildren, that reified the rural indigenous population as the holders of authentic nativist sentiments. Yet these idealized depictions that valorized indigenous culture did not make their way into the pages of textbooks trucked by burro into the ever-expanding frontiers of the rural education mission. Rural children in the 1920s did not read textbooks in which the protagonists looked or lived like them. In fact, up until a National Assembly mandate in 1930, the Ministry of Public Education had separate departments for schools classified as rural, semiurban, and urban. In 1930 these classifications held, but politicians deemed the respective curricular distinctions unconstitutional and declared that Mexican children should all study from the same textbooks and be held to the same program of “progressive work.”¹⁵

While a linear characterization of the uniform emergence of a new model of active childhood culminating in the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas would be overreaching, evidence does point to a convergence of political idealism, policy, and practice between 1934 and 1939. A 1934 reform of constitutional Article 3 officially eliminated all distinctions between schools and ushered in an experimental but brief era of socialist education, championed by Cárdenas. The advent in socialist education marked a shift in the model of the ideal Mexican child from the aesthetic to the political, as the romantic indigenous type gave way to the *niño proletario*, or the proletarian child. The

intended audience migrated as well; the government saw the burgeoning young population in the countryside as a wealthy resource to tap for the collective good of the national economy. Textbooks began to promote ideas of group citizenship over individual citizenship and promoted productivity at all levels, from the kindergartens to the state governments. Socialist education's stated goals were to transform social institutions, to achieve a better distribution of wealth, to eliminate religiosity in the classroom, and to bring the proletariat to power.¹⁶ The proletarian child was ideally situated to bridge the gap between this radical new educational movement and his parents, seen as perhaps too entrenched in structural oppression to mobilize on their own accord. The *niño proletario* lost currency by the end of 1939, as Cárdenas conceded to pressure from religious activists to curtail the secular, anticlerical overtones of the socialist education agenda.¹⁷

Regardless of these pedagogical and ideological trends that brought with them compelling social models of idealized Mexican childhood, the integration of children across the nation into the revolutionary family occurred much less cleanly. Post-revisionist historians of education caution us against confusing the SEP's intent with the actual outcome of its educational initiatives.¹⁸ Although these historians have focused their energies on the experiences of schoolteachers and community members that negotiated top-down mandates with state and municipal officials, the application of their method is instructive for the history of childhood as well. Not all children were exposed to official constructions of the symbolic child, and reasons for this abounded: some could not afford to attend school because they were needed to work at home, others attended so irregularly as to render a tiered curricular program meaningless, teachers often filtered official material according to personal beliefs or for time constraints, Catholic families withheld children from schools deemed too radically anticlerical, and middle- and upper-class urban children measured government-produced educational material against the myriad competing influences that they consumed in internationally produced children's lit-

erature. These factors and more make it impossible to outline a single contour of revolutionary Mexican childhood. To recognize the plurality of Mexican *childhoods* that were possible in an era that celebrated monolithic expressions of cultural nationalism means to recover stories both of children who conformed enthusiastically to models of the day and of those who found themselves lamentably outside of the circle of benefits that modern Mexican childhood offered to an elite few.

In effect, many children gained access to a newly constructed social category—Mexican childhood—one of a pantheon of national types erupting in popular and official culture. Beginning in the heady decade of the 1920s, the state virtually sanctioned national stereotypes into a set of icons, characters, and motifs that could be readily identified by Mexicans and foreigners alike as *lo mexicano*. In the process intellectuals and elites distilled the diverse national population into a single set of tropes carefully selected from an idealized past and projected it on the nation's walls, textbook covers, and collective memory.¹⁹ New national types celebrated by some and derided by others included the *charro*, the *china poblana*, the proletarian, the rural schoolteacher, the *india bonita*, and the *chica moderna*. As a result of the proliferation of these stylized types, children shared more common cultural references than before. Yet even the powerful ties of unifying icons did not prevent these new generations from emerging stratified into levels of socioeconomic inequality that mirrored the past and foretold the future direction of the revolution. On the one hand, universal childhood ostensibly was available to all Mexicans. On the other hand, at the operational level, many children accessed these cultural forms on uneven terms or were denied them altogether. This was the consolidation of the generations that would construct, constitute, and live through the Institutional Revolutionary Party's (Partido Revolucionario Institucional [PRI]) Mexico.

The revolutionary child trope and its attendant child-based reform agenda did not resonate with equal force across the population. Children growing up after the revolution experienced an undoubtedly nationalist curriculum, cultural milieu,

and rhetoric that formed their identities as members of a collectivity. But they also saw, heard, and tasted the global influences that coexisted, sometimes uneasily, alongside a highly idealistic emerging cultural nationalism. As chapter 6 demonstrates, boys who joined the Mexican chapter of the Boy Scouts in the 1930s navigated the complicated terrain forged by nativist and international forces. Sometimes, these influences would seem at odds with one another: how to encourage membership from poor, indigenous members into a troop while at the same time requiring that they adhere to the British-run organization's stringent uniform mandates? And as the child artists in chapter 2 poignantly and repeatedly remind us, artistic innovations from countries such as Japan simply appealed more powerfully to some than the aesthetic styles derived from ancient indigenous motifs, supposed in the 1920s by government art educators to be inherent in Mexican children. The Mexican Revolution, therefore, did not hold a monopoly on the fickle allegiances of its children.

Counternarratives of Childhood in Revolutionary Mexico

As we have seen, the institutional framework of the SEP allowed it to be one of the dominating forces defining officially sponsored ideas of modern Mexican childhood. Others have fleshed out the complex evolution of this institution that, along with land reform and labor organization, proved to be the most powerful and influential tool wielded by the revolutionary government.²⁰ This is not a history of the SEP, nor is this a history of a comprehensive socializing campaign spearheaded by a monolithic government. The government was not monolithic, nor was the campaign comprehensive. Contradictions between programs under the same government agencies, and between different administrative officials, prevented the existence of any government leviathan.²¹ Furthermore, the SEP did not provide the only model for civic engagement.

The Catholic Church, long accustomed to holding sway over children's moral instruction in their formative years, strongly resented the government's rapid encroachment upon children's

education. Since the colonial period, the church had dominated the domain of child socialization. Even in the Liberal heyday of the Reforma (1855–76), the church successfully promoted and disseminated curricula that ran counter to the official educational materials.²² Despite the heady momentum enjoyed by revolutionaries, a strong and persistent conservative counter-narrative persisted during these decades that assailed reformers for their overt politicization of the child, their attacks on traditional gender and family roles, and their staunch policy of secularization. By the twentieth century direct attacks from the revolutionary government, particularly during the Calles administration, rather than effectively cutting off religious education, drove many urban Catholic schools underground and undercover, functioning in a diminished capacity with the support of a devout middle class.²³ Anticlerical legislation such as the 1926 law that banned crucifixes and altars from the classroom fueled the radical Catholic-based Cristero movement growing in opposition to the revolutionary government, in a program of retribution that occasionally turned spectacularly violent.²⁴ Despite the constitutional requirement for secular education, Catholic schools and religious education persisted.²⁵ Children were deployed as symbols in the conservative backlash—a discourse that countered government propaganda and curriculum through church publications, pamphlets, and editorials in the conservative press. Religious organizations promoted many child-centered initiatives—such as children’s magazines, recreation centers, youth groups, summer camps, and long-distance correspondence—that paralleled those in the school system sometimes as independent programs and sometimes as an alternative to similar government programs.

As early as 1921 the Catholic children’s periodical *La Vanguardia* had identified José Vasconcelos as the most corrupting influence on Mexico’s youth. Editors published diatribes to their child audiences, warning them of the dangers of being seduced by an “imbecile and brute” who did not recognize Agustín Iturbide as the father of independence and who promoted “official atheism.”²⁶ Such periodicals were often free and provided liter-

ary competition with—or complements to—officially promoted children’s literature such as Vasconcelos’s own compilation, *Literatura clásica para niños*, a collection of classic folk- and moral tales from around the world. While Catholic publications dedicated many of their pages to doling out dour condemnations and stringent prohibitions of cultural activities (since the movies incited adolescent homicide and suicide, and the Young Men’s Christian Association [YMCA] promoted antisocial Protestantism, few church-approved activities remained for children), the spiritual life did offer its thrills for children as well. In the face of anticlericalism, a wave of “crusades” swept the nation’s parishes in the early 1920s, and children turned to youth groups for social activities. Members of the Children’s Eucharistic Crusades (Cruzada Eucarística de los Niños), established in the Colegio Francés in Mexico City, displayed enraptured responses to poignant Old Testament sermons.²⁷ In June 1923 six hundred children in Angamacútiro, Michoacán, enacted a pilgrimage to the local cemetery to honor the image of the Christ of the Sacred Heart, bearing standards that proclaimed the Cristero motto of *¡Viva Cristo Rey!*, erupting into spontaneous proclamations of joy upon arrival.²⁸

Perhaps even more appealing than those activities organized by the church hierarchy were spontaneous expressions of popular piety, many of which featured children (or representations of children) as protagonists. In the village of San Francisco Ixpantepec, Oaxaca, a region largely outside of the major Cristero-government battleground, the apparition in 1928 of the Virgin Mary to a young indigenous girl named Nicha coincided with a series of natural phenomena that resulted in a surge of pilgrims and a substantial measure of ecclesiastical debate.²⁹ The rise to fame in the late 1920s and 1930s of a so-called child healer in the northern state of Nuevo León, known as the Niño Fidencio, lured even the staunchly anticlerical Plutarco Elías Calles for a medical consultation in 1928 (during the throes of the *Cristiada*, or Cristero revolt). Fidencio was far from a child; rather, his androgynous appearance and effeminate demeanor lent him the moniker. Perhaps his nonthreatening designation

as a “child” made his miraculous brand of healing more palatable to the statesman. Regardless, the association of innocent youth and divine inspiration provided models of exceptional childhood that the religious sector could embrace and promote among children that competed with revolutionary nationalist representations. This counternarrative of alternative models of childhood, sometimes reactionary and sometimes proactive in nature, deserves a great deal more depth of study. The sources consulted here admittedly do not do justice to the many versions of childhood that did not fit the revolutionary nationalist model.

An illustration of the tenor of revolutionary detractors demonstrates recognition of the symbolic power that children had in making a political appeal to the public. Ardent demands, voiced by fictionalized child protagonists of a 1924 editorial in the conservative Mexico City daily *El Universal Gráfico*, jabbed pointedly at the excesses of the rapidly unionizing labor sector: “No more cod liver oil! Double servings of dessert! Keys to the pantry! Death to soap, combs, and other instruments of inquisitional torture! Mandatory daily lollipops! One dozen toys every week! Death to the *patria potestad!*”³⁰ The author of this metaphorical account, a frequent contributor of counter-revolutionary critiques working under the pseudonym Jubilo, described the secret proceedings of a newly formed children’s syndicate. The union’s young members, ranging in age from babbling newborns to twelve-year-olds flirting with cigarettes, gathered in resistance to the tyranny of parental and institutional control. A precocious nine-year-old boy assumed authority and rallied the diverse juvenile crowd with a reminder of the centuries of oppression endured by children at the hands of adults. He warned parents that if they did not meet these demands, the children would go on strike; they would cease to be sons and daughters and become absorbed instead into the homes of indulgent sterile and single adults longing for children to spoil. A reporter approached the boy and asked if he feared any negative reaction from his parents for his involvement in political organization. He wryly replied that no, he was an orphan—a ward, after all, of the ultimate expression of *patria*

potestad: government welfare institutions. Having successfully rallied his comrades, the young leader smugly inserted his finger into his nose and left the meeting.³¹

The counterrevolutionary camp had deployed its own version of the symbolic child that impugned the morally incorruptible proletarian child ideal. At first glance Jubilo's editorial characterized unionized laborers as narcissistic children with infantile demands that undermined their long-term well-being. They snubbed their benefactors and naively thought themselves capable of self-rule. He wrote the column at a crucial moment in the history of labor, when membership in the official union, the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana [CROM]), expanded exponentially as its organization became more tightly centralized around the corrupt figure of labor leader Luís Morones. His article provides more than the obvious political backlash against the radicalization of labor. There is much to be discovered about the ways that conservative political and religious organizations deployed images of children as well as propaganda for children as part of their antirevolutionary foment. The tenacity of these sentiments articulated alongside the mainstream left-leaning discourse contributes to the national tension between the Eagle (state) and the Virgin (church) that characterized much of the revolutionary period.

Read through another lens, Jubilo's editorial speaks vividly to the visibility of children as social and political beings in a moment when revolutionary reforms rendered children viable social actors. Beyond the political metaphor, the children in the story came alive with youthful interests: candy, recreation, and freedom from restraints. These fictional children seized upon the politically charged atmosphere of collective action to draft a set of demands that reinforced their status as children, both physically and socially removed from the adult world. Jubilo's editorial, while fanciful and satirical, reflected a historical moment in which the concept of childhood underwent dramatic changes, created by both the goals of the Mexican Revolution and the global emergence of a modern model of childhood.³²

Historical Actors and Cultural Liaisons: Negotiating Children's Agency

The history of childhood, an academic pursuit spawned in the mid-twentieth century, has sought to define the parameters of human experience as shaped by collective ideas about age. At the core is the assumption that children are not full-fledged members of society relative to adults. Philippe Ariès inaugurated the field with his classic *Centuries of Childhood*, in which he argued that medieval society did not conceive of childhood as a distinct social category, an assertion supported largely by visual representations of children as miniature adults in medieval art.³³ Pioneering explorations of the changing social value of children have led to the inclusion of age as a category of historical analysis. The field currently enjoys a revival that places children at the center of historical inquiry. Among others, Colin Heywood, Peter Stearns, and Paula Fass contributed to the development of childhood studies by placing the study of childhood within a global context, revising Ariès's beleaguered assertions to account for cultural, geographic, and temporal variations.³⁴ To this end I take up the challenge issued by Steven Mintz for scholars to adopt a "bifocal" approach to the history of childhood: to meld adult-centered histories with those that privilege the voice and views of the child.³⁵

This work forms part of the wave of scholarship examining the revolutionary programs of the 1920s and 1930s in which attention to social conditions takes priority over structural explanations in evaluating efforts to achieve the revolution's goals. The emergence of cultural history in the mid-1990s lay the foundation for research that brings top-down, government-produced history back into scholarly discussion without leaving the everyday people out. The effort to achieve cultural revolution resulted in the introduction of agencies and institutions but moved far beyond the sphere of government influence, as individuals began to fuse their own interpretations of citizenship with the official campaign. Pioneers in the study of popular culture examined festivals, material culture, and everyday

behavior and found examples of the ways individuals affirmed or critiqued officials and society's status quo. This study, following the cultural history approach, examines the interaction among and negotiations between government officials and their intended audience: children.

Scholars of nationalism, as it emerged in Mexico, as elsewhere, have rightly turned to a scrutiny of the prevailing intellectual discourses and then to the institutions designed to translate rhetoric to policy. A recent study of nineteenth-century nationalism in education by Beatriz Zepeda convincingly demonstrates the need to move beyond the official and oppositional articulations of nation to the role played by institutions (namely, state-sponsored public education) in their dissemination. A close look at the institutions reveals the limits of the state's power to reach its target audience, as highly publicized proclamations and promises often fell flat in practice or as propagandistic textbooks saw negligent distribution.³⁶ Studies of the concerted programs of citizenship formation that characterized the highly centralized nationalist regimes of Juan Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil engage in rich analysis of the textbooks and cultural production for children intended to guarantee their loyalty to their respective nations.³⁷ But some of the best scholarship on the troubled relationship between nationalist ideas and practice stop short of what is perhaps the most diffuse and least understood of processes: individual reception of nationalism. I intend to nudge the examination of the transmission of nationalism into the admittedly murky waters of historical inquiry, in which children are not simply socialized by the state and its institutions but rather respond to mandates for social citizenship in diverse ways. This project requires refocusing the lens of history on the individual and validating the power of cultural reception as powerful components in the dialectic of nation building.

In my efforts to foreground the voices, experiences, and perceptions of children, it might appear that the role of parents, educators, and institutions has a diminished importance during the revolutionary decades. This most certainly is not the

case. The integral role of individuals and structures in carefully and consciously governing, shaping, or transforming children's lives has been well documented by historians of modern Mexico, among which most recently the impressive works of Ann Blum, Susana Sosenski, Alberto del Castillo Troncoso, Nichole Sanders, Elsie Rockwell, Claudia Agostoni, and Mary Kay Vaughan stand out.³⁸ Without an understanding of the physical and rhetorical sites of interaction between the government officials and those individuals and social groups that they sought to reform, assist, educate, or heal, an investigation into the experiences of children that navigated these systems would be meaningless. Although it is not my intention to treat childhood independently from the histories of gender, women, and welfare to which it has been inextricably linked, the diversity of children's experiences merits an in-depth examination that privileges a view from below. Children did not spend all of their time in their mothers' arms or under the watchful gaze of their teachers or on the other end of a police inquisition. My intention is to move children from the aesthetic to the political realm in an analysis recently undertaken by other scholars of citizenship.³⁹

Envisioning children as citizens requires extracting the term from its political definition and engaging with its multiple subjectivities. One of the limitations often encountered in deploying this term is the conflation of citizenship with the nation-state, a relationship that becomes problematic when considering children, who are often dependent upon the nation-state's institutions for their welfare and well-being, yet who (usually) cannot participate directly in its political apparatus through voting or official representation. I situate this cultural history of childhood among the burgeoning studies of citizenship, both as process and as practice. For the children in these pages, citizenship meant meaningful (even if occasional) inclusion in any of a number of interrelated and overlapping systems: the classroom, the virtual community of radio listeners, public civic performances, church organizations, and more. Sometimes meaningful inclusion in one group put the child at odds with another community to which he or she belonged, revealing the

everyday contingency of citizenship practice. Citizenship is not a permanent quality bestowed upon children; it is in a constant state of redefinition and negotiation. In these cases, as scholars of “unexpected citizens” have begun to reveal, we see that children are not merely the product of the prevailing ideological or discursive systems under which they come of age; rather, they engage with those ideas and discourses in ways unforeseen by administrators, intellectuals, and other adults.⁴⁰

Writing the history of revolutionary Mexican childhood requires the identification of the historical actors that contributed to the social and political milieu. These actors are tiered, but as I will demonstrate, their influence did not flow solely from the top down. At the top of the pyramid looms the head of the revolutionary state: pronouncements by the consecutive presidents helped listeners to imagine the symbolic child. Calles and Cárdenas in particular gave a name and a shape to that new national type. At the second tier a transnational class of professionals emerging from the heyday of positivism contributed scientific justifications for policies aiming to improve and modernize backward elements of society. At the third tier the agencies of the revolutionary state—chiefly the SEP but also the Department of Public Welfare (Beneficencia Pública)—operationalized the rhetorical flourishes and professionalized knowledge into concerted programs for child development, including provisions for the collaboration of the proverbial village. At the fourth tier, and operating at cross-purposes with the government agencies, the Catholic Church and its adherents provided parallel programs to counter the revolutionary and international influences bearing down upon them. And finally, the fifth tier, and the emphasis here, is that of the children who participated in or were the subjects of the programs, studies, and models enacted by the levels above them. Discourses and actions flowed between and among these tiers. The relationships between these actors also shifted from the mid-1920s to the 1930s. For example, the rise of transnational influences (such as commercial sponsorship by foreign-owned companies in children’s magazines that promoted economic nationalism

among its readership) and foreign-based organizations (such as the Boy Scouts adapted to the Mexican context) received tacit, if not overt, support from the state, suggesting shifting ideas of how to make cultural nationalism a modern phenomenon.

The cultural history of twentieth-century Mexico has enjoyed a surge in recent decades, enriched by historians who have explored the quotidian experiences of sectors of society overlooked by revisionists: environmentalists, performers, Afro-Mexicans, teenagers, gays and lesbians, expatriates, industrial workers, and Catholic activists, among other groups.⁴¹ All of these studies have contributed discursively to a working definition of citizenship, as a category both defined by Mexican contemporaries and applied by historians. The placement of children at the center of revolutionary reforms, rhetorically and literally, has received short shrift in scholarship of the era; in many of the excellent monographs mentioned above, children appear only when they are in trouble (institutionalized, unhealthy, in physical or moral peril, or as political mascots).⁴² The present study revises this oversight by placing children rightly at the center of Mexico's revolutionary narrative.

Children further confuse the already muddled definition of citizenship. Barring political rights, what is the fullest way that we can expect children to meaningfully behave as citizens? In its early years, the revolution purported to uphold the fullest implementation of Liberal philosophy, extending membership in the nation to all Mexicans. Revolutionary citizenship did not equate voting rights—these were legally denied to all women and effectively denied to a vast number of indigenous men. In fact, revolutionary citizenship seemed to have much less to do with the rights and benefits due to the nation's members and more to do with the civic duties and responsibilities owed to the *patria* in exchange for the privilege of membership. The Children's Moral Code of 1925, intended for elementary schoolchildren to memorize and recite at the start of each day, summarized the government's expectations of the populace in eleven "laws" regulating behavior and social attitudes.⁴³ Once again, the existence and brief implementation of this pledge

suggest only the ideal at best. Nevertheless, the vast scale and rapid pace of child-oriented programs, literature, services, and education during the 1920s and 1930s underscore the assertions made by scholars of childhood that children's exclusion from political rights does not mean they are excluded from political *life*.⁴⁴ In fact, the cases here suggest that children can actually become political *agents*—with a range of self-consciousness. And even in the many cases in which children served as unwitting political pawns, as we shall see, mimicry became a practice, as other children watched their peers allegedly gain a political voice. Studying citizenship practiced by children, then, allows us to expand our definition of what it means to participate meaningfully in the construction of a nation, from above and below, from within and from the outside.

This book is as much about the origins of memory as it is about the construction of the modern Mexican state or the analysis of childhood as a category. As theorized by Maurice Halbwachs in his ruminations on the collective memory of the family, the common past of the Revolutionary Family formed the baseline sensory and material experiences from which a new citizenry matured.⁴⁵ Jane Eva Baxter noted that most adults do not recall how they experienced the world as a child. In her work as an archaeologist of childhood, she sifts through the material remains of a past occluded by both time and the elements to restore to modern understanding the relationships between children, their toys and tools, and the communities in which they lived.⁴⁶ Rooting through twentieth-century archival materials turns up its share of dust, though it is not nearly as gritty an endeavor. Nonetheless, a concentrated focus on recovering the historical remnants left by children—whether by their own hands or languishing between the lines of adult-produced histories—can be equally rewarding, as it allows us to piece together childhoods forgotten not only by history but perhaps even by the grown-up children themselves in their later years.

Following the path paved by other historians, my main pre-occupation here is to recover, to the extent possible, children's individual and collective efforts to process, editorialize, or repro-

duce the cultural values and tenets of citizenship conceptualized for them by the revolutionary government. Every historical voice that enters the record suffers some form of mediation, in the form of either self-editing, official censorship, or subtle manipulation of fact through interpretations of a third party. Children's history is no different. Their documents, even when written in children's own hands, often have suffered one or all of the above modifications from the pure intentionality of thought. In any case, children's heightened visibility, especially in the publicity that accompanies nation-building projects, merits a closer inquiry of the records that they left behind.

Recent scholarship has attested to the dynamic nature of child socialization rather than the more structuralist version promoted by sociologist Norbert Elias in his influential tome *The Civilizing Process*.⁴⁷ In the chapters that follow I trace the variable expressions of individuality—and conformity—that children produced through their interactions with new forms of media, technology, and popular culture. The respective contexts of art classes, radio, puppet shows, student organizations, and political rallies resulted in varying degrees of creative maneuver for the children participating in them. While children's educational radio programming emitted uniform content to all listeners, the radio itself relieved parents and teachers of supervising duties and afforded children more autonomy in their interpretive responses to the shows. Although the rigid guidelines of the official art curriculum dictated form, art pupils enjoyed considerable leeway in their choice of subject matter. Furthermore, as suggested by Foucault, within a highly supervised space one experiments with and develops new skills for self-expression. The number of child matriculates in Open Air Painting Schools (*Escuelas de Pintura al Aire Libre*) who went on to artistic careers testifies to the permanence of some of these cultural programs.⁴⁸

There will always be intangibles that leave a historian of childhood unsatisfied with her work. The task of trying to measure the power of cultural forces on the impressionable minds and unchecked imaginations of young people seems daunt-

ing. How could we access that fleeting sensation felt by a street child leafing through the pages of a discarded *Universal Ilustrado* upon seeing a printed photograph of a popular paperboy “type”? How would that sensation compare to the role-playing fantasy temporarily experienced by a wealthy urban child dressing as a *china poblana* for the local charity festival? What did Otomí children in rural Tlaxcala envision when they listened to descriptions of unknown technologies come crackling across the airwaves on their newly installed community radio? These diverse, hypothetical experiences illustrate that the nature of nation building was uneven, multivalent, fragmented, and overlapping. It did not produce a single outcome, but there were common threads that held together the fragments, and there were enough of them to begin to bind the revolutionary generations together in meaningful ways.

New technologies introduced during these decades paired with new ideologies that ruled children’s physical spaces and social interactions. New codes of conduct emerged, framed as revolutionary citizenship. As we will see, these new networks of sociability were enacted immediately following the revolution. Just as immediately, new conduct became reinforced, internalized, and identified as the standard of normativity. Adherence to freshly scripted revolutionary civic behavior paved for some children the path to distinction. Conversely, the failure to behave according to the revolutionary script—a condition usually informed by lack of access—relegated certain groups of children to the margins of modern Mexican childhood. The blueprint for a twentieth-century political culture that rewarded party allegiance began to be etched in children’s cultural domains of the 1920s and 1930s.

I make a particular effort to identify the extent to which historically marginalized children experienced official campaigns of cultural nationalism differently from their urban, nonindigenous counterparts. In some unique cases, this difference took the form of a more intense and concerted effort to reform indigenous children into the mestizo Mexican ideal, while in other cases *indigenista* reformers set these children on

a pedestal that soared far above the often grim realities of their day-to-day lives. To this end I strive to recapture, and validate, the fleeting experience of childhood. In the process, by insinuating their perspective into the rich tapestry of revolutionary Mexican history being spun by historians of women, the middle class, conservatives, bureaucrats, educators, politicians, indigenous people, teenagers, and other individuals and social groups, we can begin to better understand the extent and limitations of the abstract concepts of democracy and citizenships as they were lived by twentieth-century Mexicans.

Structure and Organization

This book explores the relationships between adult-produced rhetoric and policies that placed children at the center of plans for creating new revolutionary citizens in the period from 1921 to 1940, the establishment of new agencies to achieve this goal, the adaptation of the new mass media to the campaign, the influence of transnational models of modern childhood, and the responses of children to these multivalent cultural forces. The revolutionary campaign created a popular cultural and educational program in which children interacted with other children on local, national, and international levels, as they learned and contributed to ideas about citizenship and nation.

Chapter 1 outlines the structural framework within which children became more visible and vocal in the public eye and constitutes the adult-centered side of this book's binary. I explore adult-produced rhetoric and policies emerging from two institutional hallmarks in the history of modern Mexican childhood in 1921: the First Mexican Congress of the Child (Primer Congreso Mexicano del Niño) (as well as the Pan-American Child Congresses in which Mexico subsequently participated) and the creation of the Ministry of Education. Intellectuals and politicians involved with these institutions placed children at the center of plans to create new revolutionary citizens. Lawmakers, professionals, and governors attempted to construct a homogeneous generation of citizens through the balanced application of sound pedagogy, firm ideology, and modern medicine.

Adults transformed public space to heighten the visibility of the (healthy) child and assumed new rhetorical styles that refashioned the child as a metaphor for the nation's future—not a new formula but rather a tried-and-true metaphor infused with fresh revolutionary buzzwords. Revolutionary officials consciously attempted to create a homogeneous generation of revolutionary citizens from the top down, through the professionalization of child-related fields, the transformation of public space, the reiteration of visual motifs in public art, and the dissemination of an official bureaucratic language that placed children at the center of reforms and public policies.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 explore three different cultural domains funded by the Ministry of Education that contributed to forging a sense of generational unity among children. The expressions of cultural nationalism embodied in puppet theater, radio, and art magazines, respectively, introduced new cultural references that united children from across the country. As each chapter demonstrates, children responded uniquely to each of these programs en masse, sometimes in unexpected ways. A close look at children's interactions with these three new cultural offerings also reveals the persistence of familiar patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

In chapter 2 I examine the project of constructing a national aesthetic from the bottom up through the Ministry of Education's art education program. Spearheaded by Adolfo Best Maugard, with the implementation of his indigenous motif-based curriculum, *Método de dibujo*, in the public schools in 1921, and transformed by Juan Olaguíbel through the children's art magazine *Pulgarcito*, children learned to reproduce distilled tropes of their cultural heritage and natural surroundings. As a free, government-funded publication with nationwide dissemination from 1925 to 1932, *Pulgarcito* reveals the uneven process of nation building made evident by disparities in participation levels from urban and rural child contributors. *Pulgarcito* was unique in its nearly entirely child-produced content; its pages abound with children's commentary, both textual and visual, of the changing world around them. The national art

curriculum—with *Pulgarcito* as its main evangelist—incorporated excursions and natural observation into the lesson plans, with an emphasis on iconic natural sites such as the volcano Popocatepetl. Art instructors encouraged the creation of an indigenist, social realist, Mexico City–centered aesthetic, which children dutifully reproduced in the magazine and in art competitions. Mexican children earned fervent international acclaim for their uniformity and thematic cohesion in their design and illustration, as their drawings won competitions around the world. Yet the pages of *Pulgarcito*, and especially the letters to the editor, reveal the disjuncture between urban and rural children (and, by definition, between middle-class and impoverished children), both in their access to forms of popular entertainment such as *Pulgarcito* and in the expectations that revolutionaries had of the two classes of children. The social inequalities apparent through an analysis of the seemingly innocuous art program paralleled the growing disenfranchisement of the rural poor in the wake of the promise of revolutionary reform.

From 1932 to 1965 itinerant puppet theater Teatro Guiñol, conceptualized by socialist intellectuals, sponsored by the Ministry of Education, trucked out children’s versions of revolutionary ideology to rural elementary schools. Focusing on the most heavily funded decade of the 1930s, in chapter 3 I analyze the transcripts of the plays, correspondence between the puppeteers and upper-level bureaucrats regarding performances, letters from schoolteachers detailing children’s responses, and drawings of the puppets by the children who observed the plays. Children’s reactions to the plays reveal a disconnect between the production and the reception of these puppet shows, suggesting weaknesses in the state’s top-down dissemination of cultural nationalism. While children’s drawings may well have been filtered by adult editorial interventions, they nevertheless constitute genuine—and rare—firsthand responses to official programs intended for their benefit.

Radio emerged in the 1920s against a backdrop of new or newly available technological innovations, including the typewriter, the elevator, and the electrified trolley car. In chapter 4

I describe the children's radio programming from the official Ministry of Education station XFX and argue that radio technology tightened the web connecting children in urban and rural areas and pushed young imaginations to conceptualize common experiences shared with invisible friends. Radio transformed the cultural landscape by adding a new sensory component to the feeling of collective identity described by Benedict Anderson in his discussion of print media. Children wrote letters to the program editors in response to the children's shows; sometimes they complied with the assignments and activities suggested to them over the airwaves, but just as often they contested the terms of their participation, demonstrating a keen awareness of their relative social positions among their peers. The letters, penned in the children's own unsteady hands, contain self-reflexive references to socioeconomic status, age bias, national politics, civic engagement, and capitalist values. They suggest a surprising degree of civic engagement and class consciousness on the part of children and shed a sliver of light onto children's reception of universal education programs broadcast nationwide.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the processes of internalizing and exporting the above-described tenets of cultural nationalism by tracing children's involvement in national organizations and international organizations, respectively. They demonstrate, in the first case, the logistics involved in learning something as abstract as love for one's country and, in the second case, the mechanisms by which children learned to express this new brand of nationalism abroad through membership in international organizations. In chapter 5 I explore extracurricular activities with national coverage that allowed children to sample political life through participation in children's conferences, literacy campaigns, student councils, and anti-alcohol manifestations, all of which bore the bureaucratic trappings that would be expected from those with adult participants. First, I argue that the visibility of children in public spaces contributed significantly to the expansion of the definition of democracy. Second, I make a parallel connection between the rapidly

bureaucratizing Mexican state in the 1930s—with the consolidation of the ruling official political party, the National Revolution Party (Partido Nacional de la Revolución [PNR])—and the hierarchical structures that emerged in children’s organizations. As the previous chapters suggested, inequalities and ruptures pervaded the top-down cultural programs intended to unify the generation; in this chapter I systematically dismantle the myth of cultural nationalism. National children’s organizations during the 1930s bore the bureaucratic hallmarks of exclusionism, hierarchies, and classism that mirrored those becoming evident in the political culture of the revolutionary years and foreshadowed the future of twentieth-century Mexican social stratification.

In chapter 6 I expand my analysis to the international sphere, as Mexican children began to participate in transnational—and primarily Pan-American—exchanges among schoolchildren through the Junior Red Cross, pen-pal exchange programs, and the Boy Scouts. Membership in organizations with an international scope allowed Mexican youth to see themselves as part of a hemispheric family, united by a common race and common colonial heritage. Through their letters, presence at international conferences, individual travel experiences, or exchange of cultural goods (including charity goods, drawings, telephone conversations, and national scrapbook albums), participating children exported a version of Mexican cultural nationalism. Self-conscious expressions of a collective identity based on membership in a nation—and the symbols, images, and histories upon which this identity is constructed—are encoded in these materials exchanged between groups of schoolchildren. Meanwhile, global youth identities, and the attendant reaffirmation of gender norms, made their mark on the Mexican national chapters. The ideologically charged “proletarian child” trope, held aloft in particular by the Cárdenas administration as the revolution’s most powerful agent, teetered unsteadily alongside that of the young modern global citizen, a white Western middle-class ideal normalized in the propaganda emanating from the international headquarters of these Anglophile organizations.

As I dip into these varied cultural programs available to revolutionary children, I intend to demonstrate the gradual changes to childhood that evolved from the didactic nativism of the 1920s (demonstrated in the development of the visual arts program and the educational goals of children's radio programs) to the modernizing nationalism of the 1930s (evident in the bureaucratizing tendencies of school organizations and the popularity of the Boy Scouts and the Red Cross). These changes reflect evolving conceptions of the role that children ought to play in the nation. Throughout these two decades children responded as children will: with ambivalence, with delight, with unexpected fervor, and with lackadaisical resignation. Children like Enrique, writing from his home in the women's prison, capture that tension between the ideal and the mundane. Some embraced the socializing goals as if according to a script and became modern Mexican revolutionary citizens. But others—many, or even most—adapted the revolutionary government's cultural initiatives alongside other powerful influences of family, the agricultural calendar, foreign popular culture, and the church to construct their own version of what it meant to be Mexican.