Mexico, Revolution, and Indigenous Politics in D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*

'I…think it is my most important novel' (*Letters V*, 320), wrote D.H. Lawrence in 1925, referring to *The Plumed Serpent*, published in 1926 and set in Mexico. Yet, as N.H. Reeve observes, once 'it was in print he made scarcely any further references to it' (*Quetzalcoatl,* xxxvii). Critical consensus sees Lawrence as rejecting its focus on 'leadership, cross-racial bonding and religio-nationalist revival' for new concerns in the late 1920s (Reeve, *Quetzalcoatl,* xxxvii). In this account, *The Plumed Serpent* represents the high-water mark of Lawrence's interest in these themes, with late work embracing a focus on social and sexual freedom, as in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) and other texts. Much assessment of the book still regards it as something of an aberration in the Lawrence canon; in David Ellis's words, the novel was 'the consequence of seriously misguided effort; a work whose development took him too far away from the areas of his greatest strength' (219).[1] It is certainly a strange novel, Lawrence occupying the point of view of Kate Leslie, a traveler in Mexico. Kate is drawn to Don Cipriano de Vedma, one of the leaders of a cultic national renewal movement. Kate eventually marries Cipriano, adopting the identity of the goddess 'Malintzi'.

What has provoked less critical attention is the historical context of the novel, and in particular Lawrence's relationship to a renewed Mexico emerging out of a decade of revolutionary upheaval. Whilst the Mexico that Lawrence presents is certainly viewed through a Eurocentric lens, in another sense the novel's preoccupations reflect internal, contemporary Mexican debates over national character. The novel's touristic exploration of cultural spectacle, its attitude to indigenous cultures and its anxiety over what is external, extraneous, foreign culture and what is organic can all be seen to reflect concerns that emerge from contemporary Mexican political discourses. This is not to excuse the troubling aspects of the novel – its misogyny, its authoritarian politics, its racial essentialism – but instead it is to see Lawrence as more engaged in a live political debate about what forms of nationhood might emerge in the 1920s.[2] Despite Lawrence's unease with jingoism and aspects of nationalist politics, the novel is alive to the possibilities of nation as utopian community. Lawrence finds in the idea of Mexican nation-building a kind of energy which he harnesses in creating the form and style of his novel.

An important source for critical views of Lawrence's Mexican experiments is the American writer Witter Bynner's contemporary assessment of Lawrence as essentially uninterested in the Mexican Revolution. Bynner's memoir *Journeys with Genius* (1953) recounts Bynner's travels with Frieda and Lawrence in Mexico in 1923. Bynner recalls Lawrence's reaction to a story about the first post-revolutionary President of Mexico, Venustiano Carranza. 'Perhaps, while he listened, he was *ignoring Carranza* and was garnering notes about *unworldly, noble Indians* who should become followers of a new Quetzalcoatl, a new Lawrence' (25; my emphases). Bynner's (sarcastic) judgment here depicts an essentially solipsistic and apolitical Lawrence, focused relentlessly on ideas of the 'primitive' (the 'noble Indians') and on his own self-aggrandisement.

Bynner's judgement of the novel was that it was a book burdened 'with a hundred and seventy-two pages of fabricated, melodramatic myth' (214). Yet evidence from Lawrence's letters and from Bynner's own memoir offer a more nuanced picture of Lawrence's engagement with Mexican revolutionary culture. Furthermore, Lawrence's concerns in the novel with utopianism and place anticipate the preoccupations of Lawrence's late style, preoccupations realised – at least partially – in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), the posthumously published *Etruscan Places* (1932) and other writings. Such writings do not represent a retreat from politics into a private world but are further evidence of Lawrence's active engagement with forms of utopian thought.

Indigenismo and the Revolutionary Context

Recent work in modernist studies has located Lawrence's writing from the mid-1920s in a distinctly American critical context. Lee M. Jenkins argues for Lawrence's 'pertinence to new paradigms in American studies' (2), making a case for his relevance to border and *mestizo* studies, and to the wider transnational turn in American studies.[3] Jenkins identifies the Lawrence of 1922-5 (the years of his sojourns in New Mexico and Mexico) as *Americano*, the Spanish word for 'American'. In using the word, Jenkins makes the point that across the US-Mexican border the term blurs boundaries between Anglo, Hispanic and indigenous identities. For Lawrence, argues Jenkins, American literature 'is not a field-imaginary the boundaries of which are coextensive with national borders, but a hemispheric phenomenon, a literature of the Americas as well as a planetary geo-literature' (8). Lawrence's engagement with Mexico in 1923-5 thus comes as part of a radical reimagining of the nature of transnational or trans-cultural exchange on the writer's part. Yet Lawrence's depictions of Mexico and its people also share preoccupations with the efforts of the Mexican government in the period to re-imagine or *renew* national identity by emphasizing indigenous culture.

In 1920, Mexico emerged from a decade-long revolution; the autocratic Porfirio Diaz had been overthrown in 1910, and years of fighting and civil war followed. The Mexico that Lawrence visited was intensely aware of its new identity, and faced questions over how to present its own national culture in the context of military and social conflict. It was a culture still fragmented, anxious and militarized when Lawrence visited. In 1923, when Lawrence first arrived in Mexico, a failed revolt by Adolfo de la Huerta, a politician who had briefly been interim President in 1920, had also shattered the country's fragile sense of stability. Mexico was still in the throes of various kinds of internal struggle. On 9 April 1923, Lawrence wrote to Thomas Seltzer from Cuernacava:

> […] where Zapata held out so long. Dead, dead, beautiful cathedrals – dead Spain – dead! – but underneath, live peons. – Soldiers everywhere – riding on roof of trains to guard them – soldiers, soldiers – And ruins! Nearly all the big haciendas and big houses are ruins, shells. A great deal of waste country. (419)

Lawrence's tour of Mexican monuments here is intimately and inextricably connected to the country's recent history. The mention of Emiliano Zapata here connects the landscape to revolutionary intransigence. Zapata's radical

zapatistas held out for years until his death in 1919. By the mid-1920s, when Lawrence was writing, Zapata was becoming an iconic figure of renewed Mexican culture. Muralists like Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco (both of whose murals Lawrence saw in Mexico City and disliked) incorporated Zapata into their pictures of Mexican society. The possibility of radical violence embodied by the figure of Zapata is matched by the militaristic realities of Lawrence's tour. Soldiers are 'everywhere', 'soldiers, soldiers'. The shattered 'ruins' of post-war Mexico here may also have connected, in Lawrence's mind, to the Aztec ruins that he had been touring. Also evident here is the distinction between 'dead Spain' – the relics of a colonial past 'superimposed' onto contemporary Mexico – and the 'live' *peón.* The *peón*, the Mexican agricultural labourer, lives 'underneath' these oppressive remnants of the Spanish empire. Lawrence's inference is that the energy and life of Mexico is *with* the peón; a version of his celebrated 'primitivism' that borrows its vision from a post-colonial context, where the wreckage of 'dead' Europe crumbles in the face of a new national determinism. On 4 April 1923, Lawrence visited the famous pyramids of Teotihuacan, writing that they 'seem to have risen out of the earth: while all the Spanish stuff is just superimposed, extraneous – and collapsing' (418). In other words, for Lawrence, Aztec culture is organic, natural, rising out of and becoming part of the soil, just as Spanish architecture is unnatural, 'extraneous'.

Lawrence's assessment of contemporary Mexico parallels internal political debates about the nature of 'indigenous' culture and its uses within a revolutionary society. In *The Plumed Serpent,* Lawrence's protagonist Kate Leslie condemns the work of the muralists like Rivera and Orozco as lacking 'the spark of human balance' (59). Kate also rejects them on the basis that they cannot truly speak to the *peón*:

> "[…] what about the twelve million poor – mostly Indians? You can't make them all rich, whatever you do. And they don't understand the very words, capital and socialism. They are Mexico, really, and nobody ever looks at them, except to make a *casus belli* of them. Humanly, they never exist for you." (60)

Questions about presuming to speak *for* the 'indigenous' dog *The Plumed Serpent*. Yet these anxieties were also in part a feature of the Mexican cultural revival that emerged in the post-revolutionary 1920s. The *Noche Mexicana* and the *Exhibición de Artes Populares*, festivals to celebrate Mexico's hundred years of freedom in 1921, had considered a range of 'popular' entertainments that were intended to contrast with the elitist character of the Porfirio Diaz dictatorship. But what was truly Mexican? Bullfights were popular, and yet could easily be seen as an essentially Spanish form of entertainment. As the historian Rick A. López has observed, 'some people emphasized the country's Spanish colonial heritage as the basis for a shared cultural nation, whilst others emphasized a romanticized pre-Hispanic past' ('Noche Mexicana', 25). Ultimately the proponents of emphasizing indigenous heritage would win out, and the *Noche Mexicana* highlighted popular handicrafts: ceramics, textiles, wooden toys, tools, leatherwork. These objects were described as 'indigenous' (indíga') and 'very' or 'uniquely ours' ('muy nuestro').

Yet as Ruth Hellier-Tinoco has recently argued, such expressions of indigenous *mexicanidad* ('Mexicanness') were used *both* as tools of promoting an essential national identity *and* as touristic spectacle performed for a watching world. 'Within postrevolutionary political and ideological frameworks', Hellier-Tinoco writes, '[traditional cultures] were appropriated, commodified, and disseminated through official state channels […] within a nationalist, modernizing political agenda as embodiments of folkloric nationalism, and simultaneously deployed within touristic contexts' (5). In a Mexican spatio-temporal context, then, ideas of 'indigenous' Mexico served both as a foreigner's idea of the 'authentic' *and* as a tool for national cultural unification. These 'performances' of indigenous culture were, as Hellier-Tinoco points out 'thoroughly bound up with ideologies concerning ethnicity and race' (27). The specificity of the ethnic make-up of Mexican society – a division between indigenous, mixed-race ('mestizo') and European ethnic groups – lends a particular character to attempts to create or channel an essential *mexicanidad* in the post-revolutionary period and beyond. In this context, then, we can begin to see how Lawrence's novel emerges from a polarizing debate around the nature of 'Mexicanness' (*mexicanidad*) in the early and middle 1920s.

In particular, Mexican *indigenismo* was developed in the revolutionary years as a way of lending a cultural legitimacy to the new institutions that would emerge out of the struggle. Again, there is evidence that Lawrence took more than a passing interest in the *indigenismo* movements. As Bynner records, Lawrence attempted in 1923 to meet the Mexican Minister of Education, Josè Vasoncelos to discuss 'the Indian revival', a meeting whose cancellation sent Lawrence into a rage (26). Vasconcelos's major intervention into the *indigenismo* debates was his book *La Raza Cósmica* ('The Cosmic Race', 1925). The book was marked by its hostility to North American 'Anglo-Saxon' culture, and its delineation of an 'Atlantean' race that could bring the disparate nationalities of decolonized Latin America together. For Vasconcelos, Latin American patriotism needed to be 'rooted' in 'Cuahtemoc and Atahualpa', not in the 'feats' of nineteenth-century nationalists like Bolívar (11). Yet Vasconcelos also argued that it was necessary that such patriotism appealed to 'our Hispanic fountainhead'. Like other indigenists, Vasconcelos argued more for racial integration and mixing than for pure nativism. In some contrast to Lawrence's vision as articulated in *The Plumed Serpent*, Vasconcelos suggested that 'the illustrious Atlanteans from whom Indians derive, went to sleep millions of years ago, never to awaken […] No race returns' (16). Vasoncelos's vision thus depended on racial integration as a way to create a new spiritual civilisation that could tap into the resources of ancient pre-Columbian cultures. For Vasconcelos, Latin America was a crucible for 'the creation of a new race fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones: the final race, the cosmic race' (40). Although there is no evidence that Lawrence read Vasoncelos's work during the revising of *The Plumed Serpent*, there are uncanny echoes of his vision in Kate Leslie's musings: 'She had a strange feeling, in Mexico, of the old prehistoric humanity […] When great plains stretched away to the oceans, like Atlantis, and the lost continents of Polynesia, so that seas were only great lakes, and the soft, dark-eyed people of the world could walk around the globe' (431). Kate's reference to Atlantis is striking here; although it may or may not derive from Vasconcelos, it

provides a curious parallel to the racial dimensions of Mexican cultural nationalism in the period.

On his second visit to Mexico in 1924, Lawrence also corresponded with Manuel Gamio, Director of Archeology and an expert on the pyramids of Teotihuacán. Gamio had sent Lawrence his book *Forjando Patria* (1916) by post, which argued for the importance of indigenous cultures in a new Mexican nationalism. Gamio would, wrote Lawrence, be 'a most useful man to discuss ["Quetzalcoatl"] with' (45). Lawrence also considered sending Gamio a copy of his Australian narrative *Kangaroo* (1923), another novel much concerned with nationalism and a (largely suppressed) indigenous identity. As Neil Roberts argues, *Kangaroo* is a strange text in the history of Lawrence's interest in 'indigenous' cultures, simultaneously attracted to cultural 'otherness' and 'dependent on the absence of the Aborigine' (73). The book was an interesting choice for Lawrence to send to Gamio. In *Forjando Patria,* Gamio had proposed as essential a 'fusión de razas, convergencia y fusión de manifestaciones culturales, unificacion linguística y equilibrio económico de los elementos sociales' ('mixing of races, convergence and fusion of different cultural traditions, linguistic unity and economic equality of social groups', 325). For Gamio, culture 'es inherente a su naturaleza étnico-social y a las condiciones físicas y biológicas del suelo' ('is innate to its ethnic and social environment and to the physical and organic conditions of the soil', 184).

For Gamio, Indian culture was currently too 'timid', with indigenous populations living in shame and submission. This 'race' ('raza') had lost the glories of its pre-Columbian and indigenous heritage: 'la pujanza del bronco taraumar que descuaja cedros en la montaña, […] la sagacidad de la familia de Tlaxcallan, el indómito valor del sangriento mexica' ('the strength of the wild Tarahumara who uproots cedars in the mountains, […] the wisdom of the family of Tlaxcalla, the indomitable bravery of the bloody Mexican', 32). Why, asked Gamio, are the indigenous peoples not 'proud' of their history and legends? Here, writes Gamio, there is a 'deplorable' lack of knowledge of pre-hispanic history in Mexico (42). Thus a new consciousness of pre-Columbian history must go hand in hand with a (re) discovery of truly indigenous forms of contemporary art. For Gamio, Mexican art had become 'Europeanised', and over-dependent on the 'extraneous' cultural forms that Lawrence had noticed in Cuernacava: 'confesemos que en nuestros cuatro siglos de vida intelectual europeizada, no ha florecido un Velázquez, un Wagner, un Rodin, un Anatole France, y es probable que nunca florezcan, mientras nos empeñemos en cultivar exclusivamente modalidades extranjeras de arte' ('let us confess that in our four centuries of Europeanised intellectual life, there has flourished no Velazquez, no Wagner, no Rodin, no Anatole France, and it is probable that none will flourish, as long as we insist on cultivating exclusively foreign forms of art', 93). Gamio's book, published just four years after the Mexican revolution had begun, was written with the desire to 'stir up' nationalistic feeling (vii). To that end, Gamio extols the 'bronze and iron' ('el bronze y el hierro') of the great 'virile' races of the Americas, the Aztecs, Mayas and Incas (3).

Gamio's was not the only example of revolutionary Mexican writing that Lawrence read. As Bynner records, he was also strongly affected by Lazaro

Gutiérrez de Lara and Edgcomb Pinchon's *The Mexican People: Their Struggle for Freedom*, also published in 1914. Lawrence was reading the book on his first visit to Mexico and gave Bynner his copy as a present (see Bynner, 39). The book was an unambiguous statement of support for revolutionary socialism; yet it also couched its propagandist aims in self-consciously racial terms. The majority of Mexicans, de Lara and Pinchon claim, 'retain their ancient blood [that of the Aztecs, Toltecs, Zapotecs, Mistecs and Mayas] in all its purity' (3). Pre-Columbian civilizations were 'superior in every respect to that of the Spanish nation that subjected and enslaved them' (3-4). In *The Mexican People*, Spanish 'blood' is an 'evil legacy' that will eventually be 'overcome' by native resistance (5). The text continues:

> […] all that we know of the evil that is Mexican is the product of a small, parasitic and originally alien section of the nation; and all that we know of the good that is Mexican […] – the arts, the crafts, the poetry, the gentleness and good faith, the heroic struggle for democracy – is the product of the working class native races. (6)

A Marxist division between worker and capitalist is suggested, but here married to a biological, and racial, rhetoric that opposes 'alien' parasites and 'native races'.

Lawrence at the Bullfight

Such concerns around race – in particular the concepts of 'aliens' and 'natives' in conflict – can be found in both versions of the novel published as *The Plumed Serpent*. A key example is the bullfighting scene at the very beginning of the book. Based on a real fight which Lawrence saw in Mexico City with Frieda, Bynner and Willard 'Spud' Johnson, the bullfight is dismissed in a letter to Knud Merrild as 'terrible', '[we] ran away after ten minutes' (434). Yet in the two versions of Lawrence's novel, the bullfight becomes a testing ground for ideas of racial essence and its relationship to culture. In the progress of the two fictional versions, national origin becomes an increasingly obsessive concern for Lawrence. Both versions tell us that four 'special bulls' had been 'brought over from Spain': 'Spanish bulls are more fiery than Mexican' (*Quetzalcoatl,* 7; *The Plumed Serpent*, 11). Lawrence's disgust with the bullfight in both texts is immediately framed in the context of *national* character. The bullfight becomes an unnatural and foreign imposition on Mexico (bulls 'brought over from Spain'), just as the colonial Spanish architecture that Lawrence saw in Cuernacava is 'superimposed'. Indeed, cultural revival movements in Mexico (such as the 'noche Mexicana') were to reject the bullfight as an imposition of European culture in favour of examples of genuine, 'primordial' *mexicanidad*. In the second version of the bullfight chapter – published in *The Plumed Serpent* – Lawrence's concern with national character takes on the form of an almost obsessive commentary on the bullfight and its various spectators. By way of introducing the characters of Kate, Owen and Villiers, the text increasingly presents their attitudes and feelings as the product of national essences. Owen, the character based on Bynner, 'was American, Kate was Irish' (11). It was 'American logic […] and Kate only let herself be overcome' (11). Later in the chapter 'Villiers', the character modeled loosely on Willard Johnson, tries to prevent 'a fat Mexican'

from sitting in the space by his feet: 'the young American's face was so cold and abstract, only the eyes showing a primitive, bird-like fire, that the Mexican was nonplussed. And Kate's eyes were blazing with Irish contempt' (17). A few sentences later Villiers summons up all 'his American will', the 'bald eagle of the north bristling in every feather' and Kate uses 'all her Irish malice to help him' (18).

Such national essentialism becomes an interpretative preoccupation for Lawrence in the novel; events and conflicts are viewed through the prism of national character. The novel's focus on the Aztec revival movement led by Ramón and Cipriano leads to much discussion on the nature of national identification. At the end of the bullfighting chapter, when Kate first meets Cipriano, he tells her that 'foreigners seem to make the Mexicans worse than they are naturally. And Mexico, or something in it, certainly makes the foreigners worse than they are at home' (28). For Cipriano, national essence is forged by, and in response, to geography; as for the Mexican indigenists, national destiny is related to an innate relation to space, soil, land. In Lawrence's novel, such visions are simultaneously resisted whilst at the same time allowed to exert a mysterious power. Kate ends the chapter feeling that 'Mexico lay in her destiny like a doom' and is happy to escape to a tea-house where she can 'feel herself in the *cosmopolitan* world once more, to drink her tea and eat strawberry shortcake and try to forget' (29; my emphasis). In the original, *Quetzalcoatl* version of the passage, the tea-house is named as 'Sanborn's' which was an American restaurant and – according to *Terry's Guide to Mexico* – 'the meeting place of the Capital's elite' (*Quetzalcoatl*, 329). Lawrence's introduction of the word 'cosmopolitan' into the second version of the passage highlights the sense in which Kate's desire to escape from 'oppressive' Mexico at the end of the chapter is framed in terms of an embrace of *international* as against *national* culture. For Kate, 'the cosmopolitan world' thus figures as willed choice, escapist enclave and refuge from 'heavy' Mexico, whose atmosphere is likened to 'the folds of some huge serpent' (29).

Yet the bullfight itself figures, on one level, as an international spectacle. Just as the presence of the Spanish bulls is a reminder that the practice is *imported* and European, so the picadors and horses are aligned in Kate's mind with Spanish culture: 'O shades of Don Quixote! O four Spanish horsemen of the Apocalypse!' (20).[4] In the stalls, Owen and Villiers, as we have seen, are associated with an 'Americanism' that is drawn towards 'sensation' (21). Owen, we are told, 'was a born American, and if anything was on show, he had to see it' (12). Figured alternately as Spanish, American and Mexican, the bullfight spectacle simultaneously blurs and confuses national categorization at the same time as these visions of racial or national character are essentialised within the text.

Intriguingly, it is possible to read such complex positioning as an anticipation of various recent movements within American studies. The field has undergone a number of well-known 'remappings' that take account of 'white' America's interactions with and dependence on its Hispanic and indigenous others.[5] Such recent interventions owe much to work in postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and geography, and to figures like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and James

Clifford. Clifford's work, for example, has theorized the border and the place of indigenous identity. For Clifford, indigenous experience or selfhood are not fixed entities; rather they are involved in 'an interactive, dynamic process of shifting scales and affiliations, uprooting and re-rooting, the waxing and waning of identities' (2). Whilst Lawrence's writing in the passages above focuses on Mexico City – a long way away from the US-Mexico frontier – it must be noted that Lawrence's visits to Mexico were undertaken as trips across the border from Mabel Dodge's ranch in New Mexico. Lawrence's writings frequently compare Mexico with the United States – the two 'Americas' lying either side of the border. In March 1923, writing from Mexico City, Lawrence says that Mexico is 'much more like S. Italy than U.S.A' (*Letters* IV, 414), whilst by the beginning of April Lawrence writes: 'Mexico City is […] *very American* on the one hand, and slummy on the other: rather a mongrel town' (IV, 417; my emphasis). Furthermore, a border consciousness pervades the writing, as different nations and cultures are seen in interrelation to one another. Yet, I argue, such apparently 'cosmopolitan' concerns do not imply a denial of the importance of nation or race for Lawrence. Instead, these concepts are held up to scrutiny by introducing them within a milieu of internationalism and cultural encounter. *The Plumed Serpent* thus stages its visions of cultural unity in a context of cosmopolitan tourism and mixing. In the chapter 'To Stay or not to Stay', where Kate is considering whether to remain in Mexico, she muses:

> They were of many tribes and many languages, and far more alien to one another than Frenchmen, English and Germans are. Mexico! It is not really even the beginnings of a nation: hence the rabid assertion of nationalism in the few. And it is not a race.
>
> Yet it is a people. There is some Indian quality which pervades the whole […] (83)

Mexico here both is and is not a nation; or to be more precise, it is not a nation, but it is 'a people'. As Kate tries to conceptualise the country, she observes fragmented tribes and languages and no connection. The nationalism she does observe is described as 'rabid' and confined to 'the few'. And yet, there is 'some Indian quality' which 'pervades' the whole: Kate sees an integral social world based on indigenous culture. So whilst nationalism is rejected here, nation – in the idea of a mystically united 'people' who share an indigenous culture– reappears. Again, Lawrence's thinking here seems to form a sort of parallel with the *indigenismo* movement of Mexican nationalist thinkers in the 1920s. Muralist artists like Diego Rivera and others would, in the words of critic Desmond Rochfort, use an 'insistent and repetitive image of the Indian as peasant rooted in the land' (47). Such an image fitted a turn towards the pre-Columbian that coincided with the excavation of Teotihuacan by Manuel Gamio and others. The excavation had been completed in 1921, just two years before Lawrence's first visit. The novel's struggles to define Mexican identity thus parallel an increased emphasis on indigenous identity within the internal cultural politics of Mexico in the 1920s.

Performances

For Witter Bynner, the dance performances in *The Plumed Serpent* depended on what Lawrence had seen of native American culture in New Mexico, 'above the border': 'he turns back to the Tewas, the Kiowas, the Apaches', and 'Lawrence knew well enough *this was not Mexico*' (209; my emphasis). There seems to be some justification for Bynner's assessment. Lawrence himself said of the people of Oaxaca (where he stayed in early 1925) that: 'There's never a dance down here. They're terribly un-dancy, these Zapotec and Mixtec Indians' (*Letters* V, 195). Yet dance was crucial both to Lawrence's novel, and to the developing sense of Mexican identity projected by the government in the 1920s. Key to understanding the cultural climate of Mexico in the period is the notion of Mexican authenticity being a staged or performed 'event'. This culture was exemplified by magazines like *Mexican Folkways*, a bi-lingual journal launched in 1925.[6] Published in English and Spanish, it was designed for both internal and external audiences attracting interest from visitors and expatriates and Mexicans. Whilst the founding editor was Frances Toor, an American expatriate interested in anthropology and indigenous Mexican culture, the magazine was also funded by the Mexican government and featured contributions from Manuel Gamio, among others. *Mexican Folkways* thus attempted a dual goal of satisfying a new fascination with Mexican culture amongst English speakers (a trend Lawrence was a part of) and creating and disseminating a new kind of Mexican national identity based on pre-Columbian ritual, 'traditional' culture and indigenous art.[7]

The discourse exemplified by *Mexican Folkways*, as Ruth Hellier-Tinoco elaborates, often formulated the indigenous Mexican as existing in a kind of other world, a sort of 'nowhere' that seems to have emerged from a kind of utopian thinking. In a 1928 article by Frances Toor about visiting the Janitzio fishing communities on Lake Patzcuaro in central Mexico, the people of the island and their culture are described as a 'strangely beautiful dream in an unreal world' (cited in Hellier-Tinoco, 74). Toor's visit is also described as 'un cuadro' 'a scene' – a staged or performed event. In Hellier-Tinoco's words, this scene is 'positioned outside of contemporary and modern Mexico, existing in the same temporal space, yet confined to a state of a dream, and therefore not real' (74). The real indigenous people encountered here are placed on the 'outside' of culture whilst at the same time made representative of culture's most deeply authentic and unchanging realities. Mexican national politics in this period was often guilty of deeply conflicted attitudes to the figure of the indigenous Mexican, desiring the 'assimilation' of this figure at the same time as idealizing indigenous identity as representative of spiritual rootedness, and the power of unchanging tradition.

Lawrence's own essentialising characterisations of Mexican indigenous peoples can be seen to parallel discourses existing within Mexico in the post-revolutionary period. For Lawrence, writing in April 1923, 'the natives are interesting, more alive […] bright, quick dark eyes. And there is the same old gulf between Spanish and them – no real fusion. And the Spanish now collapsing' (418). The 'native' Mexican is here both 'interesting' and 'alive' and also strongly othered, distanced and monumentalized. Later in April, he would write to his

mother in law that 'the Indians are *always outside*. Revolution comes and revolution goes, they stay the same' (433; my emphases). Again, Mexican national efforts to understand and categorise indigenous cultures in the period parallel Lawrence's own discourse, with 'the Indians' remaining on the *outside* of culture, unchanging, fixed and rooted. Carol Siegel makes a parallel point about Lawrence's attitudes to women, seeing a paradoxical relationship between his 'essentialism' on the one hand, and his attempt to write '*for* women as the embodiments of resistance to the masculine' (19).

Also crucial here is the idea of authentic 'Mexicanness' (*mexicanidad*) as a performed identity. Hellier-Tinoco coins the phrase 'performism' to describe the peculiar way that Mexican identity was staged in both nationalistic and touristic contexts (38-9). Thus music, dance, costume and embodied ritual became central components in an 'event' of national authenticity simultaneously intended to solidify and cement national unity and to function as touristic spectacle. Similarly, *The Plumed Serpent* is a book almost obsessed with performative spectacle. Indeed, the descriptions of dances, drumming, costume and ritual that occur in the latter parts of the novel seem almost to overwhelm the text:

> At the same instant the sound that always made [Kate's] heart stand still woke on the invisible air. It was the sound of drums, of tom-toms beating rapidly. The same sound she had heard in the distance, in the tropical dusk of Ceylon […] The sound she had heard from the edge of the forests in the north, when the Red Indians were dancing by the fire. The sound that wakes dark, ancient echoes in the heart of every man, the thud of the primeval world. (348)

As Susan Jones has observed, whilst Lawrence at times seems to treat 'primitive' dance with a kind of religious reverence, his depiction of ritual dance draws much from western performative spectacle**.** In his famous 1924 essay on the Hopi Snake Dance (based on his experience of seeing Native American dances in New Mexico), Lawrence writes: 'please, no clapping or cheering or applause, but remember you are, as it were, *in church*' (as cited in Jones, 113). Yet, as Jones points out, 'his fictional evocation of primitive dance draws on imaginative reconstruction of primitive ritual that uncannily suggests the performance strategies of Diaghilev's *Rite of Spring*' (113). In other words, Lawrence's visions of primitive dance are at some level a 'western' imaginative version of 'the primitive' mediated through aesthetic treatments by figures like Stravinsky and Diaghilev. Again, Lawrence's interest in ritual dance is at one with a wider turn in modernism 'to an *idea* of ancient ritual to express the violence that would be required to expunge contemporary civilization from its disillusionment from its own sterility' (Jones, 111). For Neil Roberts, Lawrence's depictions of Mexican dance draw on 'cultural/racial essentialism' whilst demonstrating the 'simultaneous availability of the experience […] to the European visitor' (156-7). Note how the sound of the drums in the passage quoted above is mediated to the reader as a kind of synthesis of different cultures and environments. The Mexican drums recall both 'the tropical dusk of Ceylon' and the 'forests in the North, when the Red Indians were dancing by the fire' in this evocation of 'the thud of the primeval world'.

Yet the cultural essentialising of these European modernist evocations of the 'primitive' was also reflected in Mexican cultural attempts to build a renewed sense of nationhood. Key figures in the Mexican cultural revivals like Adolfo Best Maugard had, like Lawrence, been inspired by the primitivism and primordialism seen in European modernist art. The *Ballets Russes* dances of Stravinsky and Diaghilev and the emphasis on tribal totem in art by Picasso and others encouraged many of the organisers of the 1921 *Noche Mexicana* festival to appropriate a 'primitive' indigenous 'Mexican-ness'. As Rick Lopez, Ruth Hellier-Tinoco and others have explored, these images were being appropriated and disseminated by a Mexican elite of white European descent to 'perform' an essential or authentic Mexican national identity. 'Popular and rural aesthetics' became in Hellier-Tinoco's words, 'a base or germ for the creation of Mexicanness' and 'the embodiment of the ultimate expression of primordial Mexicanness' (66-7). Key in Lawrence's novel is the notion that performed ritual can cement or even create national identity, an idea paralleled in the cultural activities promoted by the Mexican government in the 1920s and 1930s. As Rick Lopez has observed, by the 1930s, various indigenous dances from across the country were being taught in Mexican schools, both to 'improve' and to 'nationalize' the local populations (*Crafting Mexico*, 9-10). Towards the end of *The Plumed Serpent*, Kate sees the Quetzalcoatl cult dance and sing the 'Welcome of Quetzalcoatl'. It was, she says, the 'people of Mexico opening its voice at last. It was as if a stone had been rolled off them all, and she heard their voice for the first time, deep, wild, with a certain exultance and menace' (366).

Utopia and Late Lawrence

Where does *The Plumed Serpent* fit into a chronology of Lawrence's later writings? The political commitments of Lawrence's late texts continue to provoke much critical discussion. That Lawrence continued to be interested in utopian possibilities in his later years is confirmed by the presence of the late unfinished *Autobiographical Fragment* (written in 1927), which re-imagines aspects of William Morris's utopian fantasy *News from Nowhere* (1890). The piece sees Lawrence revisiting the Nottinghamshire landscape of his childhood. The narrator of the story returns to the town of Newthorpe, that has become infected with 'jazz and short skirts, the Palais de Danse, the Film and the motor bike' (54). Escaping from the modern nightmare, the narrator crawls into an old quarry and falls asleep, waking up a thousand years later. The quarry is a portal into another type of existence: 'a gate, into a deeper, sunnier, more silent world' (57). Whilst this world stands as an imagined future, it is also – as in the work of Morris – an alternative vision of the present where people and place are organically and harmoniously united. In this utopian society, people 'have the stillness and the completeness of plants' (65), and the 'individual was like a whole fruit, body and mind and spirit, without split' (62). This vision of Newthorpe is both a fantasy, and very much the product of Lawrence's political disenchantment with the contemporary nation state. In Lawrence's mind the connection of community to landscape and spiritual health was being threatened by capitalism, democracy, socialism, and modernity.

Yet aspects of the world of *Autobiographical Fragment* borrow directly from Lawrence's engagement with the utopian politics of revolutionary Mexico as

engaged with in *The Plumed Serpent*. Just as utopian Newthorpe has 'a great stillness […] and yet a magic of close-interwoven life' (62), the ritual world of Ramón and Cipriano's Quetzalcoatl movement takes place against 'the eternal Mexican silence' (458). Similarly, the social rituals of *Fragment* are cemented around rhythmic dance: 'the men softly stamping, the women rustling and slowly clapping' […] slowly, in one slow wing-movement, the arms of the men rose up unanimous, in a sort of salute' (65). Compare Kate's impression of the Mexican dances in *The Plumed Serpent*: 'It was the old, barefooted, absorbed dancing of the Indians, the dance of downward-sinking absorption […] the absorbed dance of the softly-beating feet and ankles, the body coming down softly, but with deep weight […] as when a male bird treads the hen' (363-4). Central here is the importance of the body's rhythms in mediating the spiritual integrity of the event. As Ruth Hellier-Tinoco has argued, concepts of performed 'embodiment' were also crucial to the ways in which Mexican nationalism was conceived in the 1920s and beyond. In Hellier-Tinoco's analysis, Mexican dance was a means for 'the presentation, re-presentation, and reactualization of symbolic systems through living bodies'. The 'weight of history' is thus 'felt in, on, and through the body' (40), just as the 'downward sinking absorption' of Lawrence's Quetzalcoatl dancers connects them to the Aztec past. For Hellier-Tinoco, the 'incorporation' of the indigenous body was part of a strategy of 'nation-building' that aimed to disseminate visions of 'authentic Mexicanness' (41).

Whilst the body is recognized as a key focus for Lawrence's late writings, this focus is often construed as part of a movement towards the private and personal, and away from societal and political concerns. Michael Squires for example, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of Lawrence's last novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, comments on the 'transformations of the self' that lie at the heart of the book, arguing that the novel 'insists on *enclosures*' (xxii, xxiv; my emphasis). Yet, as Morag Shiach has pointed out, the body in *Lady Chatterley Lover* (first published in 1928) is as much a focus for questions of *labour* as of sexuality. For Shiach, physical labour emerges as a 'key point of resistance to mechanisation and the power of commerce in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*' (93). The gamekeeper Mellors, in this reading, emerges 'as an anachronistic figure whose very oddness might provide a resource for utopian imaginings, [a] kind of figure of medieval labour' (99). Whilst, for Shiach, Mellors's labour is at one level 'individual and artisanal' (99), his emergence as an embodiment of medieval craft (again, William Morris is an obvious if unacknowledged influence here) suggests the possibility of a wider utopian vision of society. Indeed, in Mellors's letter to Connie at the end of the novel, he imagines an ideal society akin to the descriptions sketched in both the *Autobiographical Fragment* and *The Plumed Serpent*:

> They [working-class men] ought to learn to be naked and handsome, all of them, and to move and be handsome, and to sing in a mass and dance the old group dances, and carve the stools they sit on, and embroider their own emblems. Then they wouldn't need money. And that's the only way to solve the industrial problem: train the people to be able to live and live in handsomeness, without needing to spend. (300)

Note how Mellors's vision celebrates the development of a spontaneous group identity – the people should 'sing *in a mass* and dance the *old group dances*'. The response to industrialisation, mechanisation and capitalism is here construed as a system that focuses on the body's spontaneous expression. Yet that expression is constructed within the group and as part of communal tradition; this thus, I contend, reflects Lawrence's continued interest in the forms of national community that he had explored in *The Plumed Serpent*. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a novel almost obsessed with the idea of England, and the supplanting of 'the England of Robin Hood' with 'the industrial England': 'Connie […] had clung to the remnants of the old England. It had taken her years to realise that it was really blotted out by this terrifying, new and gruesome England, and that the blotting would go on till it was complete' (156). The union between Connie and Mellors is not therefore simply a vindication of sexual expression and individualism, but rather sits as part of a wider vision of utopian potential, invested in exploring the future of the national community in an era of technology and mechanisation.

In the posthumously published *Etruscan Places* (1932), the various Etruscan sites in central Italy that Lawrence visits are again depicted by the author as representing a type of ideal society, a society that Lawrence places in opposition to Roman civilisation. Roman culture is viewed in the book with suspicion, in both its ancient and its contemporary Fascist expression (there are a number of references to the Mussolini regime in the essays). Lawrence, as Judy Suh has recently argued, allows a complex and at times conflicted 'resistance to imperialism' to emerge from the essays (109). Despite Lawrence's rejection of Fascist versions of national history, however, this does not imply a reluctance to engage in what an ideal or utopian society might look like. As Suh argues, *Etruscan Places* is 'remarkably attuned to the processes of modern nation-formation' (95). Here, crucially, Lawrence makes a direct reference to the Mexico he had recently explored and written about in *The Plumed Serpent*. The tombs of Cerveteri emerge on a 'rough, uncultivated plain' that was '*like Mexico*, on a small scale: the open, abandoned plain; in the distance little, pyramid-shaped mountains set down straight upon the level, in the not-far distance; and between, a mounted shepherd galloping round a flock of mixed sheep and goats' (7; my emphasis). Lawrence's comparison of the Etruscan site to Mexico is not accidental; Etruscan and pre-colombian civilisations appear linked in Lawrence's mind to the 'prehistoric Mediterranean world' (19) to which the Etruscans belonged. Again, this world is placed in contrast to Roman imperialism and Mussolini's Fascism: 'the Fascists […] consider themselves in all things Roman, Roman of the Caesars, heirs of Empire and world power' (24). Lawrence's Etruscan society is – as in the visions of *Autobiographical Fragment* and *The Plumed Serpent* – one of dancing and movement. Studying the painted frescos at Tarquinia, Lawrence observes that the 'dancers on the right wall move with a strange, powerful alertness onwards […] And so they move on, on their long, sandalled feet, past the little berried olive trees, swiftly going with their limbs full of life, full of life to the tips' (38-9).

Yet the vital spirituality that Lawrence associated with the Etruscans is continually tied to the native cultures of America that Lawrence had recently observed in Mexico and New Mexico. The conventions of painting male figures

red in the Etruscan tombs are compared to the rituals of 'Red Indians' (41), and what Lawrence calls the 'old idea of the vitality of the universe' is seen as emerging from 'China or India, Egypt, Babylonia […] the Pacific and […] *aboriginal America*' (50; my emphasis). Furthermore, ancient Rome's displacement of Etruscan civilisation ('the ancient world of king-gods') is compared obliquely to the Spanish conquest of Mexico and the deposing of the 'Aztec and Maya lordships of America' (74). The Mexican revolutionary state's emphasis on an indigenous consciousness and its attempt to recover an integral pre-colombian culture here colour Lawrence's 'reading' of Etruscan civilisation. The trauma of pre-colombian Mexico's displacement by colonial Spain is here superimposed upon imperial Rome's displacement of the Etruscans. Reading ancient Italy through the prism of the indigenous politics of Mexico, Lawrence attempts to recover a sense of communal potential, the Etruscans figuring as an alternative utopian society. Lawrence's interactions with the cultural projects of revolutionary nationalism in Mexico were vital in shaping the utopian political imaginary of his later writings. Far from signaling the end-point of Lawrence's political experiments, *The Plumed Serpent* represents an opportunity for the writer to reimagine new forms of political community in the later 1920s. Lawrence's engagement with the different varieties of cultural nationalism being developed in 1920s Mexico set a blueprint, I contend, for the utopian ambitions of his late work.

Notes

[1] Despite its general marginalisation in studies of Lawrence, there have nonetheless been a number of critical approaches to the novel. Neil Roberts reads *The Plumed Serpent* as negotiating its way around Lawrence's racial anxieties and displaying a complex and ambiguous attitude to the other. Hugh Stevens has seen the novel as representing 'a discourse of homoerotic primitivism' (224), and in particular sees the transition from the first incarnation of the book, *Quetzalcoatl* (written in 1923-4), to the final version of *The Plumed Serpent* as a gradual toning down of the homoerotic resonances of the book.

[2] See Cornelia Nixon, *Lawrence's Leadership Politics and the Turn Against Women* (1986). As Nixon points out, Lawrence 'developed his leadership politics at a time when authoritarian political thought was on the rise'. Although Lawrence 'denounced fascism itself', 'his views were similar in many respects to those held by some contemporary European intellectuals sympathetic to fascism' (5).

[3] A brief survey of this turn might include recent works like Paul Giles's, *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (2011), Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (2009), and Dimock's and Lawrence Buell's edited collection *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (2007).

[4] Lawrence's reference to *Don Quixote* also aligns the suffering horses of the bullfight with Quixote's tired horse Rocinante in Cervantes's novel. Like the picadors, of course, Quixote is also a mounted figure bearing a lance.

[5] See for example, José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (1997), Alfred Arteaga, ed., *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands* (1994).
[6] See Ruth Hellier-Tinoco, pp.62-4. The journal, argues Hellier-Tinoco, was vitally influential in shaping ideas of Mexican folk art.
[7] From 1926, Diego Rivera was the art editor of the journal.

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