

LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Indios y burros: Rethinking "la India María" as Ethnographic Cinema

Ariel Zatarain Tumbaga

Antelope Valley College, US
aztumbaga@gmail.com

This article traces the origins of María Elena Velasco's comic character "la India María" through what Fatimah Tobing Rony has labeled *ethnographic film*. It explores how Velasco's first film, *Tonta, tonta, pero no tanto* (dir. Fernando Cortés, Mexico, 1972), borrows conventional linguistic and performative representations from the so-called Indigenista films of Emilio "Indio" Fernández and Benito Alazraki. The essay also studies how popular discourses regarding Indigenous intelligence and the trope of illiterate Natives as "burros" coincide with the state ideologies behind comic representations of Indigenous characters.

Este ensayo traza los orígenes del personaje cómico de María Elena Velasco, la "India" María, a través de lo que Fatimah Tobing Rony denomina cine etnográfico. Explora las maneras en que la primera obra filmica de Velasco, *Tonta, tonta, pero no tanto* (1972), adopta las convenciones lingüísticas y performativas de representaciones del cine indigenista de Emilio "Indio" Fernández y Benito Alazraki. También se estudian los efectos de discursos populares sobre la incapacidad intelectual y el lugar común del nativo como "burro", y sus coincidencias con las ideologías estatales detrás de las representaciones cómicas de personajes indígenas.

In every part of the city are found the "Marías" with their children, installed on the corners with the greatest volume of traffic, selling chewing gum and trinkets or begging from passing cars.

—Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México profundo*

"La India María" is one of Mexico's most beloved film icons. Actress-director María Elena Velasco performed as the comic personality for more than five decades and in various forms of media. La India María's screen trajectory begins with her 1971 television debut in the popular program *Siempre en domingo* and her 1972 film debut in *Tonta, tonta, pero no tanto*, and concluded with *La hija de Moctezuma* (2014) released less than a year before Velasco's death. To many, la India María is a film representation of Mexico's economic underdogs and Indigenous rural migrants who try their luck in Mexican cities seeking employment opportunities largely absent in their communities. As a caricature of the Mazahua migrant, she embodies would-be ethnographic Indigenous traits conventional to Mexican film: limited formal education, excessive modesty, traditional attire, and Indigenous speech. Consequently, she is portrayed as the unassimilated, backward Indigenous woman navigating the perils of urban Mexican modernity, though her picaresque personality allows her to deliver unexpected sociopolitical critiques. Although Velasco's movies suffered a lack of critical acclaim because of their low aesthetic quality and rudimentary story lines, la India María's popularity is irrefutable.

At first glance la India María movies can be too easily disregarded as popular cinema, "churros" produced for mass consumption and for a public readily amused by the derision of Indigenous peoples. La India María, whose full name is María Nicolasa Cruz, is indeed infantile and gullible yet charismatic and hardworking; ignorant and inarticulate but feisty and endearing. Catering to a popular Mexican audience, she is consistently feminine and modest, yet in later films she achieves feats of strength and authority. While she is an occasional instrument of sociopolitical satire, scholars nonetheless concur that la India María

is a stereotype of the Indigenous Mexican woman interpreted through crude humor and unsophisticated plotlines. She personifies gendered and racial clichés in a 1970s industry that depicted women within the trappings of virginity, motherhood, and prostitution—as represented by Virgen de Guadalupe iconography, long-suffering mother roles, and *fichera* movies (Ramírez-Berg 1992, 58–59). Velasco's performance often upholds the worst national prejudices about aboriginal and rural Mexicans and reproduces colonialist race discourses and postrevolutionary assimilationism promoting the racial and cultural superiority of the very non-Indigenous villains she thwarts. While her underdog victories inspire audiences' cheers, Velasco's interpretation reveals an accepted popular denigration of Native Mexicans.

La India María's ideological and technical origins have yet to be fully explored. Velasco's achievement as a character actress is evident in her protagonist's longevity as well as in the social relevance of her satirical quips. Velasco reprised her role under a variety of social situations—food vendor, mayor, nun, and migrant—in which la India María effectively mocks powerful antagonists seeking to take advantage of her as an Indigenous woman. The character owes a debt to the Golden Age of Mexican cinema's classic picaresque characters, the likes of Mario Moreno's Cantinflas and Germán Valdés's Tin Tan. Her popularity is also partly due to her racial appearance and the economic challenges she faces, all of which make her triumphs the more cathartic to working-class audiences.

Shifting toward an ideological analysis, it is useful to reconsider la India María's first movie, *Tonta, tonta, pero no tanto* (1972), as a product of ethnographic, or ethnographically inspired, filmmaking, as defined by film scholar Fatimah Tobing Rony: that is, as cinema that "describes a relationship between a spectator posited as Western, white, and urbanized, and a subject people portrayed as being somewhere nearer to the beginning on the spectrum of human evolution" (1996, 8). After all, Velasco's India María is premised on a specific aboriginal population and on technological and performative conventions established by non-Indigenous filmmaking. In this context, this essay examines the representative conventions—racial, performative, and technical—instituted by two works of early ethnographic cinema—Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (United States, 1922) and Sergei Eisenstein's *iQue viva México!* (Mexico, 1932)—and in the Indigenista melodrama of Emilio "Indio" Fernández and Benito Alazraki, taken as precursors to Velasco's India María. Though Indigenista melodramas characterized Native Mexicans as a redeemable, albeit culturally retrograde people, the films nonetheless developed ways to depict their backwardness as endearingly comical. And because public education serves as a conventional trope associated with the redemption of Native Mexicans, I also study it alongside the popular use of the term *burro* as an epithet describing Indigenous cultural underdevelopment in Mexican cinema. While *Tonta, tonta, pero no tanto* avoids much of the sentimentalism of the classic Indigenista melodrama, Golden Age Mexican cinema's ethnographic and comedy conventions are very much at work in Velasco's first India María film. Its comedy relies on the same ideological registers and conventions familiar to Indigenista cinema audiences. The concluding analysis studies the ways Indigenista film conventions and discourses work to produce a comical *india* heroine-protagonist who triumphs over her adversities despite her indigeneity.

Ethnographic Cinema and Its Discourses

Carmen Huaco-Nuzum (1992, 146) connects la India María's origins to "the liberal folk regionalism of *indígena* films influenced by the work of Sergei Eisenstein and Robert Flaherty, which attempted to recreate an 'idealized Mexican indigenous aesthetic', that spoke to the dominant white culture"; that is, ethnographic cinema. By *ethnographic cinema* I am referring to what Rony (1996, 8) categorizes as film that presents Indigenous people through racial, cultural, and historical difference to a non-Indigenous audience. Rony's flexible definition can be extended to popular and art film as well as to scientific (e.g., anthropological), educational, and propagandist movies. Ethnographic cinema encompasses the technical and performative tendencies discernible in cinematic interpretations of indigeneity. Despite its scientific-sounding moniker, ethnographic cinema is not beholden to academic accuracy. To the contrary, as the product of a mestizo-white industry, Mexican ethnographic cinema reduces its Indigenous subject to an easily consumable stereotype or trope. Like other national cinemas, Mexican cinema also reflects the attitudes and desires of individuals and collectives involved in the filmmaking process, including its conceptualization, technology, and distribution; it is, as Rony (1996, 8–9) explains, a non-Indigenous "social practice with conventions that profoundly shape its forms." Dolores Tierney (2007, 87), for example, stresses the ideological implications of cinematic lighting conventions when sustaining that cinematography "has developed to favor lighter skin." She draws attention to the use of light in *María Candelaria* (dir. Emilio Fernández, Mexico, 1944), in which non-Indigenous actors in Indigenous roles are filmed in a way to "make them look visually lighter than the rest of the community," while Indigenous villains "are lit to appear darker" (2007, 89–90). Carl J. Mora

reminds us of common criticisms hurled against casting practices that perpetuated "the preponderance of *güeros* (i.e., blondes, fair-complexioned types) in the Mexican media, a phenomenon that rarely escapes the notice of many foreign visitors" (1989, 162).¹ Of actress Elena Sánchez Valenzuela's role as an Indigenous woman in *En la hacienda* (1922), Ricardo Pérez Montfort (2007, 180) notes that "the only Indian thing about her were her braids" (de india sólo tenía las trenzas). Sergio de la Mora (2006, 86) critiques the lack of critical attention given to Pedro Infante's *indio* performance "in brown-face and completely stereotyped as childlike and superstitious" in the classic Indigenista film *Tizoc (Amor indio)* (1956), despite the actor's conspicuous racial whiteness. Mexican popular cinema's adoption of such conventions thus signals a desire to transcend the nation's own dark bodies by highlighting Mexico's pre-Columbian origins while distancing Mexicans from their Native contemporaries (the descendants of a once racialized colonial caste). Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1996, 124) bemoaned Mexican media's representation of Indigenous people and culture "as something outside, unfamiliar, and picturesque, but, above all, dangerous, threatening, and profoundly disturbing"; in sum, he contends, "for the media, [the contemporary Indigenous community] does not exist." But this also means that filmic performance of indigeneity is imbued with specific non-Indigenous social values.

María Elena Velasco created *la India María* with the ethnographic goal of racially and to a lesser degree economically and culturally representing the Mazahua women of the state of Mexico's northwestern region. Velasco's María Nicolasa Cruz wears the Mazahuas' long, colorful satin skirts, sash (or *rebozo*), and at times ribbon-adorned braids. In addition to her outwardly Mazahua appearance, María seems to represent both Indigenous and agrarian-mestizo rurality, a common conflation in 1970s anthropological and political thought (Hewitt de Alcántara 1984, 131–134). This is not to say that Velasco's goal was ethnic accuracy, nor to solicit support for Mazahua women; in fact, in the 1960s, "the character wore makeup and bangs ... and her clothing did not identify her with any specific ethnic group" (Rohrer 2017). Rather, Velasco wanted to solicit laughter, more often than not at the expense of her *india* hero, and reiterated her parody to be primarily for entertainment and less a vehicle to question social injustices (Rohrer 2009, 54). Velasco also chose the Mazahua migrants in part because of their ubiquity. Writing in 1987, Bonfil Batalla contextualized the so-called Indigenous *Marías*' pervasiveness as part of "the accelerated growth of the large Mexican cities in the last fifty years ... due principally to the arrival of the Indian or mestizo immigrants from rural zones" (1996, 51). As J. M. Valenzuela Arce has noted, rural Mazahua communities had been especially affected by the 1970s economic downturn exacerbating the already disadvantageous agrarian economy and access to financial and material resources needed for agribusinesses (1998, 180–181). Consequently, Indigenous migrant women came to represent a visible segment of the capital's domestic worker and street vendor class in an often underpaid and informal economy. Velasco herself would allude to their substantial presence in detailing her conception of *la India María*: "Living in Mexico City, I walked by these women in the streets every day ... until one day it crossed my mind to impersonate one of them" (Rohrer 2017). Seraina Rohrer (2017), who published the most extensive study on Velasco's career, concludes *la India María* to be a positive stereotype of the Native everywoman. Carol Clark D'Lugo (2008, 14–15) similarly finds in *La India María* a consistent representative of "nameless and faceless" working-class Indigenous rural women migrants, "remain[ing] constant in appearance, character, social class, and actions."² Following countless film and television appearances, Rohrer (2009, 56) defines *la India María* as an Indigenous *topos*, a stable filmic trope established through continual repetitions; a stability, I argue, attributable to its reliance on long-standing representational conventions easily recognized by Mexican audiences.

Representational conventions in Mexican ethnographic cinema often depend on the consignment of Indigenous people to a national past that perpetuates the racist discourse of aboriginal intellectual inferiority. Eisenstein's *¡Que viva México!* (1932), whose technical and representational styles influenced much of Golden Age Mexican cinema, establishes a postrevolutionary visual juxtaposition of contemporary Indigenous Mexicans with pre-Columbian relics, animals, and natural landscapes; Carlos Monsiváis (2010, 311) describes the Russian filmmaker's contribution to Mexican film as "indigenous faces promoted to the category of magueys and clouds" (*rostros indígenas promovidos a la categoría del maguey y las nubes*). Pérez Montfort (2007, 151–152) similarly recognizes Eisenstein's part in creating a popular cinematic

¹ Racial anxiety is present in a frequent *Siempre en domingo* skit in which María, explain Castro Ricalde and Hind, "chased the host Raúl Velasco ... all through the studio, as an Indian 'in love' with the *güerito* (a Mexican term that signifies a person of light complexion and/or someone who appears to belong to the upper classes)" (2004, 202).

² However, in *Las delicias del poder* (1999), Velasco plays identical twins separated at birth—María and non-Indigenous sister Lorena, an upper-class presidential candidate—(D'Lugo 2008, 13), revealing the complexities of "Brown/Red" Face by an actress who "clearly defines herself as a modern mestiza woman" (Rohrer 2009, 68n6).

stereotype of the Zapotec women of Tehuantepec, or Tehuanas, fashioned as aboriginal matriarchs endowed with devastating tropical eroticism. Like la India María, Golden Age cinema indios were not depicted as modern Mexicans but paradoxically, by virtue of their culture and race, as Mexico's living origins. Simply put, Mexican ethnographic cinema confers a primitivistic otherness onto Native Mexicans markedly in contrast with Western-mestiza/o modernity. A major post-revolution anthropological and political treatise, Manuel Gamio's *Forjando patria* (1916) exacerbated Native otherness, outlining future efforts to culturally and economically assimilate Indigenous Mexicans (2010, 160). Lamenting the indio's lack of linguistic and cultural national identity, Gamio effectively institutionalizes a postrevolutionary belief in aboriginal atemporality in his assertion that the Indigenous person "lives in a backwardness of 400 years, even if he conserves vigorous mental aptitudes. His intellectual achievements are a continuation of those that developed in pre-Hispanic times" (2010, 97). By distancing contemporary Native communities from a "modern" mestiza/o culture, Gamio simultaneously reinforces Indigenous retrograde otherness and the centrality of a necessarily mestiza/o national community forged through racial, linguistic, and cultural commonalities. For learned Mexicans, the twentieth-century aboriginal was a pre-Columbian type rendered culturally ridiculous and folkloric by "modern" scientific standards. As a result, Mexico placed political onus on state intervention and the formation of a formal education system capable of redeeming Native Mexicans through rural literacy campaigns and Mexican assimilation.

Tonta greatly depends on historical and popular discourses of inferior Native intellect, one of its common tropes being the juxtaposition of *lo indio* and *lo animal*. As a feature of ethnographic cinema, aboriginal atemporality commonly emerges with a set of rapprochements (e.g., Native-landscape, Native-animal) and *de facto* Indigenous aversion to contemporary technologies. One constant motif in Velasco's first movie is the intimate relationship between María and Filemón, her burro, who is representative of rural-agrarian livestock familiar to Mexican audiences and is often depicted as her intellectual equal. In this sense, *Tonta* echoes earlier iterations of the Native-animal conflation in ethnographic cinema. A seminal work of Indigenista cinema, Eisenstein's interpretation of Indigenous Mexicans in *¡Que viva México!* benefitted in great measure from the anthropological theories of Anita Brenner's *Idols behind Altars* and her ethnographic vision of an atemporal indigeneity, likening contemporary Mayans to ancient temples and Indigenous men to stone idols (Pick 2010, 99); indeed, concludes García Riera (2000, 95), Eisenstein reproduces "indigenous rigidity, expressive of a historical destiny, with its tragic burdens and heroic steadfastness before adversity and fatality" (el hieratismo indígena, expresivo de un destino histórico, con sus cargas de tragedia y de temple heroico frente a la adversidad y la fatalidad). While Eisenstein interprets contemporary Indigenous cultural stagnation in association with pre-Columbian idols and pyramids, he also connects *lo indio* to *lo animal*, at one point going so far as to portray naked Zapotec children as small monkeys, their tiny dark bodies and legs rapidly scaling stone steps. By animalizing his actors, Eisenstein inadvertently "inscribes Mexico within European primitivism" and posits Native peoples in an earlier evolutionary state (2007, 78). Similarly, in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), Nanook is represented as a raw-meat-eating noble savage and is strategically featured alongside his sled dogs, a once important part of Inuit trade and subsistence economy. The juxtaposition both animalizes the Inuit man and effectively distances him from his Western audiences (Rony 1996, 115). Rony reminds us of the history of European zoomorphism and the Inuit people: "Because of their diet of raw meat, they were described as animal-like, savage, and cannibalistic" since the late sixteenth century (1996, 105). The trope of the animalistic Native is equally colonial in Latin America. In reference to Indigenous intelligence, early colonial chronicler Fernández de Oviedo declared that "as their skulls are thick, so is their reasoning bestial and ill-intentioned" (cited in Myers 2007, 122), while Jesuit José de Acosta (1952, 86) exhorted patience in missionaries since "he is an irrational, a donkey, the Indian or the Negro" (es un irracional, un jumento el indio o el negro). Colonial approximations of Natives to beasts, writes María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, were a common feature of sixteenth century debates as a way to portray them as possessing "a remedial humanity in need of Christian correction" (2016, 43). Saldaña-Portillo refers to theologian Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda's animal-tinged conclusion, in the historic 1550 Valladolid debate, justifying Spanish conquest over Indigenous peoples "who in wisdom, skill, and humanity are as inferior to the Spanish as children to adults, or women to men, for there exists between the two as great a difference as between savage and cruel races and the most merciful, between the most intemperate and the moderate and temperate and, I am on the verge of saying, between monkeys and men" (cited in Saldaña-Portillo 2016, 42).

Unlike simian analogies that would assume scientific racist connotations, the term *burro* and its variants connote inferior intellect through comparisons to domestic beasts of burden common in a Mexican agrarian economy. As a popular euphemism for inferior intellect, the term *burro* has persisted in anti-Indigenous

rhetoric. Anthropologist Roger Bartra's interviews with rural landowners and bureaucrats in the state of Hidalgo reveal the use of this term to explain away Indigenous poverty and poor educational attainment in the 1970s: "Well I say they are *rather stupid*, they lack training" (Pues yo digo que son *medio burros*, les falta preparación) (1974, 462). While *burro* does not specifically connote indigeneity, when applied to Native Mexicans it conjures an array of racist imagery easily discernible in film. The cinematic indio is not only recognizable by his darker skin tone, straight black hair, and white peon-style shirt and trousers—or traditional huipil or pollera dress and rebozo—but also through a conventional submissiveness, short gait, and weak grasp of the Spanish language, the latter of which insinuates inferior intellect (Ramírez-Berg 1997, 77).³ Many of Mexican cinema's indio interpretations embody the old saying, *indios y burros todos son unos* (Indians and burros are one and the same).

In its reproduction of discursive cultural binaries—tradition/modernity, rural/urban—ethnographic cinema's Indigenous portrayals serve to estrange Native bodies from so-called modern spaces, consequently infantilizing Native characters. *Tonta's* comedy, heavily centered on la India María's cultural underdevelopment within an urban milieu openly hostile to her ethnicity and gender, ultimately results in the amplification of the Mazahua hero's contrasting otherness (Huaco-Nuzum 1992, 143; Rohrer 2007, 58; Castro Ricalde 2011, 47–48). These conventional binaries are discernible in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, which depicts a childlike Inuit hero impressed by all forms of Western technology; Nanook hunts exclusively with traditional weapons, despite his access to firearms, and bewilderedly bites down on gramophone records. Nanook's encounters with technology provoke a perplexed smile that, captured as a close-up, offers his primarily non-Indigenous audience an infantile aboriginal visage; "When he faces the camera," confirms Rony, the Indigenous actor "smiles, [which is] interpreted by critics to mean that he was childlike, not complex, feeding Flaherty's conception of 'primitive Eskimos' as simple people" (1996, 111).

Reproducing early ethnographic cinema's Native portrayals, films by directors Emilio "Indio" Fernández and Benito Alazraki depict an equally puerile aboriginal character who inhabits an Edenic wilderness untouched by Western modernity. Of Fernández's *María Candelaria* (1944), *Río Escondido* (Mexico, 1947), and *Maclovía* (Mexico, 1948), Indigenista films par excellence, Monsiváis critiques the figuration of a Mexican "Paraíso Perdido" (Lost Paradise), in which "Nature is the Nation's essence" (La Naturaleza es la esencia de la Patria) (2010, 341). These films stage a rural Indigenous paradise invaded by national modernity—the Mexican Revolution, capitalism, contemporary art—thereby provoking a clash between mestizo/white cultural superiors and their in many cases morally superior Native counterparts. While often tragic, Native-mestizo culture clash is also performed for comic effect. Such is the case in Fernández's *Maclovía*, in which the rural teacher don Justo loses his temper with his Purépecha students' inability to name the father of Mexican Independence, admonishing: "Hidalgo, you great ass. Hidalgo! Hidalgo! Hidalgo!" (Hidalgo, grandísimo asno. ¡Hidalgo! ¡Hidalgo! ¡Hidalgo!) Don Justo then directs the adorable Indigenous boy, named Ponciano, to assume his place against the wall with the other students cruelly categorized as "donkeys" (*jumentos*). While racially denigrating simian analogies might offend mestizo audiences, the film's reliance on the popular use of *burro* as a stand-in for ignorance provides subtler racist undertones; considering the agrarian use of burros in rural Mexico, the term reduces its victim to human labor automaton, thereby moving the "dumb Indian" stereotype into the realm of economics and avoiding direct references to evolutionary science. The comical use of the term *burro* and its variations (ass, donkey) to connote inferior intellect turns pathetic when José María, an Indigenous adult, solicits don Justo's help to write a letter to his beloved. Instead, don Justo unloads his ire on the deferential José María, whom he selects as an example for the low-performing students: "To wind-up as a *burro* is the most terrible of tragedies." (Quedarse hecho un burro es la más terrible de todas las tragedias.) In his animalization of aboriginal students and their elder, the well-meaning rural teacher, on whom their redemption depends, creates a nearly unbridgeable distance between himself, the *civilized* Mexican, and the Native community he serves.

Based on author-anthropologist Francisco Rojas González's short stories, Alazraki's *Raíces* (Mexico, 1953) offers another example of cinematic ethnographic pretensions in its portrayal of its Otomí, Mayan, and Tzotzil characters, often through the same culture clash between rural Indigenous people and modern mestizo or white outsiders. The Indigenous performances in *Raíces* bear similarities to both the stoic faces juxtaposed with pre-Columbian idols in *¡Que viva México!* and the smiling Nanook in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*. In one scene, the Chamula man named Mariano allows a rural doctor and an anthropologist named Jane into his house to treat his pregnant wife's difficult labor after forcing the local *curandera* (or faith healer) to leave;

³ Pérez Montfort (2007, 177) identifies this very same garb worn by pre-cinema actors in early twentieth-century comic portrayals of the "indito."

as the doctor replaces the curandera, *Raíces* thus executes the displacement of traditional healing methods with Western scientific medicine in the proverbial natives' hut. The physician's grueling surgery causes the European Jane to cringe as Mariano sits as motionless (and emotionless) as one of the idols sampled in the movie's opening sequence. Heraldizing its arrival, the newborn's cries are accompanied by a close-up of the Chamula's unexpectedly smiling face; the abrupt emotional transformation and the amplification of Mariano's uncharacteristic glee transforms him into an Indigenous man-child. As in the case of *Nanook*, Mariano's close-up is alienating. Instead of relating to the new father, the non-Indigenous audience can more easily associate the Chamula's childish smiling face with the infant's cries. If, as Monsiváis (2010, 316) wrote of Indigenista cinema, "the nation was introduced to the facial serenity of the indigenous" (la nación se inicia en la serenidad facial del indígena), it was nonetheless a childlike face that intimated mental-cultural underdevelopment.

Indigenista cinema's ethnolinguistic conventions are on display in the form of a popular vernacular and an atypical pronunciation that distance the performance of Indigenous Spanish from linguistic standards of Mexican national identity. Scholars look to Fernández's *María Candelaria* as an early paradigm of conventional movie indio speech. This and subsequent Indigenista films conventionalized a regional "Indian" language style in which *quiere* became "queres"; *fue* became "jue"; *misma*, "mesma"; and so on. Though endowed with a level of dignity and elegance, *María Candelaria*'s protagonists, María and Lorenzo Rafael, pronounce each other's names as "MARia" and "Lorenzo Rafail" to purposely sound nonstandard and folkloric (Monsiváis 1994, 169). This performed speech corroborates linguistic stereotypes based on hierarchies of proper national expression that stigmatize rural regional speech (Santa Anna and Parodi 1998, 36; Tierney 2007, 84–85). While folkloric and endearing, *María Candelaria*'s protagonists' way of speaking has the double effect of identifying them as unmodern others and representing them as childlike intellectual inferiors. Velasco's *India María* similarly employs a linguistic interpretation denoting prenatal and folkloric simplicity, mainly for a non-Indigenous public. But, as we shall see, *la India María*'s indigeneity and rurality are elaborated through her initiation into urban modernity, rendering her linguistic simplicity embarrassing instead of idyllic, foolish instead of stylish.

After continual usage in early and mid-twentieth-century filmmaking, these conventions became institutionalized forms of representing Mexican indigeneity in film, so much so that Charles Ramírez-Berg (1997, 86) identifies movies like Manuel M. Delgado's comedy *No tiene la culpa el indio* (1977) as films that appropriate and openly mock them, which can also be said of Alfonso Arau's *Calzoncín inspector* (1974). In other words, cinematic tropes of Native behavior (submissiveness), language (stigmatized rural speech), and intellect (burro) became so conventional as to dignify their parody. But the cinematic representation of Indigenous people emerges as more problematic when cinema is popularly understood as a reflection of Native reality (Rony 1996, 13); this is noted in Monsiváis's work on Mexican audiences of the 1940s and 1950s (Monsiváis and Bonfil 1994, 68–74). But instead of a comic parody of ethnographic cinema, we will reflect on Fernando Cortés's *Tonta, tonta, pero no tanto* (1972) as a work that relies on those same time-tested conventions and the values they represent to produce hilarity at the expense of Indigenous portrayals.

Tonta, tonta, pero no tanto

Directed by Golden Age Mexican cinema veteran Fernando Cortés, *Tonta, tonta, pero no tanto* (1972) was María Elena Velasco's debut as a movie star. Like many of her subsequent movies, *Tonta*'s story line relies on the narrative formula of Indigenous migration, thereby turning *la India María* into one of many Indigenous women who migrate to metropolitan areas in search of work. *Tonta* reflects the end of the so-called Mexican miracle in 1970s, when the policies that had industrialized the nation's economy and increased migration to urban centers failed. Newly elected president Luis Echeverría (1970–1976) had inherited a legitimacy crisis provoked in part by the 1968 repression of protesters leading up to the Tlatelolco student massacre on October 2—Echeverría himself implicated as then minister of the interior—and anti-government guerrilla movements, most memorably of Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez Rojas in Guerrero (Muñoz 2016, 16). Echeverría extended an olive branch to filmmakers and writers financing quality, even socially critical films (Ramírez-Berg 1992, 41). In an era in which established commercial filmmakers experienced decreased financial support, the success of *Tonta*, and by extension its production company Diana Films, was anomalous (Rohrer 2017). Historian Emilio García Riera (2000, 158) also blamed Mexico's cinema crisis on middle- and upper-class preferences for European and US films and damaging industry union struggles, resulting in cheap products aimed at "a less demanding audience not infrequently made up of illiterates or semi-literates" (un público no pocas veces compuesto por analfabetos o semianalfabetos, de menores

exigencias). Television personalities such as Roberto Gómez Bolaños and Velasco herself successfully replaced iconic Golden Age stars on the big screen (Mora 1989, 161–162). A low-budget comedy adhering to filmic representative conventions of *lo indio*, *Tonta* is in many ways “escapist entertainment that enables [audiences] to forget for an hour and a half their economic and other personal problems” (Mora 1989, 164).

While the film exploits unlikely story lines—María helps solve two crimes (one local, the other international) and befriends a famous television host—and silly physical antics, Mexico’s 1970s economic crisis and failed national project of racial-cultural homogeneity loom large and provide a sympathetic ambience for the otherwise buffoonish protagonist (Lomnitz 2001, 261–262). The 1970s signaled an academic and political shift away from Gamio’s assimilationism in favor of a Marxist model that interpreted Indigenous community issues in terms of economic problems and rural dependency on urban institutions (Hewitt de Alcántara 1984, 167–169). Consequently, Native ethnicity had lost importance as Indigenous communities were reinterpreted as part of the rural peasantry and through economically motivated migration. Considering the movie’s somber socioeconomic undertones, *Tonta* nonetheless recovers conventional Indigenous tropes proven to be effective comical devices—movie indio language, wardrobe, and conduct—and (dis)places its aboriginal protagonist to Mexico City.

Tonta is not a product of Indigenista filmmaking, such as movies by Emilio Fernández and Benito Alazraki, but nonetheless it exhibits consistencies with a tradition of ethnographic film. It adopts ethnographic cinema’s representational conventions of Native speech, behavior, and intelligence, as well as the theme of culture clash and the conventional juxtaposition of Native people with animals. María Nicolasa Cruz’s indigeneity is connoted in geography, body, and association with the animal world. First, the aboriginal protagonist simulates Mazahua women migrants from the northwestern region of the state of Mexico, whose 1970s ubiquity reflects the communities’ limited access to the financial and material resources needed for their traditional agricultural economy (Valenzuela Arce 1998, 180–181). A dark mestiza woman of short physical stature, Velasco’s imitation is also more convincing than that of more racially European Golden Age cinema actresses, something to which scholars attribute the character’s success (Mora 1989, 162; Huaco-Nuzum 1992, 145). In her analyses of subsequent movies, D’Lugo (2008, 4) recognizes Velasco’s popularity among mestiza and Indigenous women as “a central figure, no longer marginalized by her sex and ethnicity, with whom they can identify.” But we cautiously note the representational scarcity of Indigenous people in Mexican film and Velasco’s own cosmopolitan *mestizaje* while depicting an Indigenous woman. *La India María* has two other conspicuous characteristics: her inseparable companion, Filemón the burro, a symbol of a rustic agricultural society, and the rural town of San José from which she originates. In light of rural to urban migratory trends in the decade of the movie’s release, suburban audiences would have been familiar with the significant role of burros as an economic reality of rural-agrarian life. As we shall see, both animal companion and hometown are opening and closing elements in *Tonta* that support the movie’s underlying discourses of aboriginal cultural deficiency and, eventually, Native redemption. And while her picaresque qualities allow *Tonta* to insert *la India María* in different geographical and social spaces, her metropolitan incursion distinguishes her from previous iterations of aboriginal characters. It is noteworthy that Castro Ricalde (2004, 204) insists on the Mazahua protagonist’s resemblance to classic lower-class *pícaros*, such as Mario Moreno’s *peladito*, Germán Valdés’s *pachuco*, and Eulalio “El Piporro” González’s *norteño*. Her accidental mischief in Mexico City differs from conventional Indigenista narratives positing Indigenous characters in idyllic rural settings. The effect is an intensification of the otherwise meek and folkloric *India María*’s aboriginal otherness, unyieldingly manipulated for laughs. Presented as geographically and culturally out of place, *la India María* appears to be a specter from a bygone, idyllic Mexico.

Ethnographic Cinematic Conventions in *Tonta, tonta, pero no tanto*

Tonta, tonta, pero no tanto establishes the protagonist’s indigeneity in its recuperation of ethnographic and Indigenista cinema conventions. The film opens with a traveling sequence in which María Nicolasa Cruz (*la India María*) and her father, both riding burros, and her mother, on foot, trek toward a picturesque chapel through a landscape covered with magueys. Here, director Fernando Cortés associates the Native protagonist with three visual conventions established in Eisenstein’s *¡Que viva México!* and later adopted by Emilio Fernández: rural landscape, a proximity to animal life, and religiosity. As in Eisenstein’s film, the maguey-covered topography corroborates María Nicolasa Cruz’s rural origins. And her burro, like Eisenstein’s iguanas and tropical birds and María Candelaria’s *marrana* (swine) (in Fernández’s *María Candelaria*), recovers the close relationship between Indigenous communities and animals in Mexican film. Furthermore, *Tonta* associates the unmarried, virginal protagonist with imagery of the Virgen de

Guadalupe, following a film tradition of depicting aboriginal women as Virgen María archetypes (Ramírez-Berg 1992, 63). After establishing la India María's indigeneity, the story line initiates its comedy by exploiting discourses and cinematic conventions denoting Native intellectual inferiority.

Tonta reaffirms the protagonist's rural indigeneity by taking advantage of ethnographic cinema's dialogue and language conventions to allude to the Mazahua protagonist's cultural-educational shortcomings. Like "civilizing" father figures present in so many Indigenista movies, the Catholic "padrecito" (little father) patiently assists his pueblo's illiterate Natives (María Nicolasa and her parents), reading them a letter from their city-dwelling cousin, Eufemia, who invites María Nicolasa to work with her in the city. Eufemia, who embodies a modern mestiza archetype, is contrastingly cosmopolitan, which is further highlighted in the letter's slang-riddled message. The movie thus offers a more "Mexicanized" relative with which the audience can readily identify. Mamá Cruz, María Nicolasa's mother, reconfirms their state of illiteracy when playfully explaining to her daughter, "I won't tell you to write because after all you do not know how" (No te digo que nos escribas porque a cabo ni sabes); she is seconded by father Tata Cruz: "And if even you do write us, what for, if we do not know how to read?" (Y si nos escribes pa qué, si no sabemos ler.) The benevolent "padrecito" anticipates the film's Indigenous/urban culture clash in his cautioning of the dangers of city life. But if *Tonta* pokes fun at Native illiteracy, the film nonetheless touches on the reality of a 25.8 percent national illiteracy rate in 1970 (Robles y Moctezuma Navarro 2013, 10). A problem unevenly burdensome in impoverished rural, Indigenous communities (Robles y Moctezuma Navarro 2013, 13), it nonetheless allowed most urban Mexicans to participate in the painful joke of Indigenous educational deficiency.

Tonta concurrently depicts María's intellectual inadequacy by adopting linguistic conventions standardized in Golden Age Mexican cinema. La India María's verbal expression emphasizes the atypical rhythm discernible in the films of Fernández and Alazraki. Tierney's conclusion about Dolores del Río's María Candelaria can also be deduced about Velasco's María Nicolasa: "Far from speaking her 'native tongue' . . . , she speaks a kind of pidgin Spanish which is neither the anti-bourgeois linguistic play of Cantinflas, a familiar character from 1940s Mexican comedies, nor indeed a respectful depiction of the way indigenous people speak" (2007, 84). But devoid of del Río's relatively clear pronunciation and physical elegance, the bumbling María Nicolasa's language production can digress into incomprehensible whimpering that infantilizes her speech and strips her of linguistic dignity. Although la India María's popular vernacular—"probe" instead of *pobre*, "aonde" instead of *adonde*, "asté" instead of *usted*, "vide" instead of *vi*, and so forth—is one of her popular features, hers is what Claudia Parodi and Otto Santa Ana (1998, 34–35) identify as a regional speech type whose use is exemplary of "the way in which others evaluate and place a speaker in the social hierarchy." As such, the Mazahua character's language production "include[s] the lexical, phonological, and syntactic items that are generally stigmatized by the national speech community of Mexicans" (Parodi and Santa Ana 1998, 40).⁴ One might be tempted to interpret her nonstandard pronunciation as recognition of the difficulties rural Native Mexicans face negotiating the dominant language. But such an analysis becomes less credible considering Velasco's character does not speak the Mazahua language. Neither expressing herself in her ethnic language nor able to speak "proper" Spanish, the character is linguistically neither here nor there. Merged with an inferior intellect and excessive submissiveness, all of which associates her with the meek Indianness of Golden Age Mexican cinema, la India María's speech provides an easy laugh for audiences possessing a basic formal education; at the same time, the film's lampooning of indio Spanish reestablishes a hierarchy favoring the audience's proximity to urban middle-class Spanish speakers. The protagonist's stigmatized language production also echoes postrevolutionary concerns over assimilating marginalized Native Mexicans into a national linguistic community. Gamio, who viewed nonstandard Mexican Spanish in terms of problematic divergent dialects, insisted that the "fusion of races, convergence and fusion of manifestations of culture, [and] linguistic unification" were necessary "conditions that must be established in the Mexican population, so that it may constitute and incarnate a powerful *patria* and a coherent and defined nationality" (2010, 164). While Gamio's assimilationist Indigenismo had fallen out of political favor in 1970, it is easy to see how the derisive use of aboriginal and regional speech conventions in film continue to enforce a national linguistic mandate for cultural and racial unity.

Tonta reintroduces the conventional human-animal intimacy found in Flaherty's and Eisenstein's ethnographic pictures, but for the specific purpose of instituting comedic subintelligence. *Tonta* accomplishes this by revisiting the long-standing discourse connecting rural indigeneity and burros. While representative of an agrarian economy, Filemón the burro is tellingly introduced as a member of the family:

⁴ Linguist Valeria Valencia Zamudio highlights *Ni de aquí, ni de allá's* portrayal of "gringo" and indio Spanish, and the refusal of Latinas/os to speak Spanish (2016, 239).

"Well, he's a burro if only by name, because he's real sharp and smarter than the whole family" (Pues es burro nomás de nombre porque es retebusado y más inteligente que toda la familia), explains María Nicolasa. This joke leads the audience to two possible conclusions: that Filemón is smarter than a human being, or that the "Indian" family is dumber than an ass. Here, the film establishes an intellectual equivalence between Native and animal. The punch line arrives in the form of a train station sign announcing the pueblo's official name, "San José de los Burros," thereby extending the discourse of intellectual inferiority to the pueblo's entire Indigenous population. María herself confirms her own inferior intellect when her Mexico City employer, doña Julia, asks if she is a "médium" (spiritual medium) capable of communicating with the departed. Confusing "médium" with "medio," which means *half*, María quips, "Well, half stupid, to tell the truth!" (Pues medio mensa ipa qué más que la verdad!) *Tonta's* comical wordplay recuperates the cinematic and popular referencing of Native Mexicans as "medio burros," observed in Bartra's interviews (1974, 462). *La India María's* wordplay, combined with her innocence (or simple ignorance), is the driving force behind comical exchanges with social superiors and authority figures. But just as Cantinflas relies on his socioeconomic inferiority and street smarts as a basis to demean his adversaries with linguistic satire, in *Tonta la India María* often premises her verbal wit on Indigenous subintelligence and cultural ignorance.

Tonta also references and openly mocks anthropological discourses common in postrevolutionary debates. The film samples ethnographic cinema's fixation on Indigenous traditions dealing with death, present in films like Eisenstein's *¡Que viva México!* and Fernández's *Maclovía*. When working in a mansion as a domestic, María Nicolasa explains to her aristocratic employer, doña Julia Escandón de León ("Condesa del Valle"), her community's special relationship to the afterlife: "And in my pueblo, they have taught me that the dead are not seen, but they are felt." (Y en mi pueblo me han enseñado que los muertos no se los mira, pero sí se los siente.) The aboriginal-spirit world connection is revealed as a funny hoax when María Nicolasa simulates contact with doña Julia's dead husband to win her over. Indigenista discourses also enter the fray in a dinner. As the quietly smiling Mazahua serves up dinner, doña Julia's white upper-class niece Lucy inquires, "And from which pyramid did you get this Totonaca?" (¿Y esta totonaca de qué pirámide la bajaste?) Totonaca is the name of Indigenous communities residing in Veracruz and Puebla, and an epithet referring to racial and cultural inferiority. The aging aristocrat defends her Native servant: "Do not speak that way, Lucy! She is the basis of our race." (¡No hables así, Lucy! Ella es la base de nuestra raza.) This scene reproduces a common Indigenista debate. On the one hand, Lucy bemoans María Nicolasa's ostentatious manifestations of autochthonous race and culture, clear signs of her lack of assimilation. On the other hand, Julia upholds María Nicolasa's indigeneity as important to modern Mexico's biological origins as a mestizo nation. Comfortably deliberating María's indigeneity, both women represent a white, upper-class elite profiting from inexpensive Indigenous labor. For Lucy, the Mazahua domestic is an inferior other whose racial and cultural difference mark her as abhorrently unmodern, unassimilated, and therefore scarcely Mexican. The film nonetheless delegitimizes doña Julia's cultural nationalist fervor, depicting it as the ramblings of a "retechiflada" (crazy) remnant of the Porfirian era aristocracy. Considering the benefits she reaps from her Indigenous servant's disadvantaged socioeconomic position, the high esteem in which doña Julia holds María Nicolasa seems hypocritical; as Bartra (1974, 461) notes, the same repressive elite classes pay lip service to the nationalist discourses of racial fusion and venerable Indigenous origins. *Tonta* inadvertently lays bare the defunct nature of Indigenista discourses and cinematic indigeneity based on folkloric motifs and cultural nationalist mestizaje in a decade in which anthropologists "had to reinvent a nation that no longer had an indigenous baseline but was still centered on taking command of projects of national development" (Lomnitz 2001, 261). Though present during Lucy and Julia's exchange, the Indigenous protagonist's conspicuous silence reflects not only the silencing of Indigenous voices in film but in society writ large. As Claudio Lomnitz-Adler concludes: "They have been 'muted,' and are correspondingly absent from the dominant forums of political discussion and public debate and have little access to the media of publicity. These forms of exclusion have been denounced both as a rather subtle form of racism and as internal colonialism" (Lomnitz 2001, 264).

The question of María Nicolasa's well-established intellectual inferiority necessarily refers us back to the title, *Tonta, tonta, pero no tanto*, and to the question of *la India María* as a social justice character. Academics tend to analyze *la India María* as a purveyor of social criticism in response to films in which the protagonist inadvertently stumbles into situations of power (*La presidenta municipal* [1975], *Las delicias del poder* [dir. Ivan Lipkies, Mexico, 1996]), or embodies the plight of Mexican migrants (*Ni de aquí, ni de allá* [dir. María Elena Velasco, Mexico, 1988]) (Huaco-Nuzum 1992; Valenzuela Arce 1998; D'Lugo 2008; Castro Ricalde 2011). Perhaps alluding to *Tonta* in a 1990 interview, Velasco defended her Mazahua protagonist as "naive and uneducated, but *not dumb*" (ingenua e inculta, pero *no tonta*) (1998, 182; original emphasis); we might

then interpret the title as "Dumb, but not stupid," which connotes limited academic knowledge but real life know-how. The character demonstrates small moments of resistance in *Tonta*. One finds examples of what Josefina Ludmer has called *las tretas del débil* (tricks of the weak), as when la "India" María shields herself behind the trope of Indian backwardness and rural folksiness as a basis for her technological ignorance and unorthodox behavior.

Studying Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's strategic negotiation of authority, gender, and political norms, Ludmer (1984, 48) concentrates on the tactic of simulating *not knowing* as a woman intellectual responding to political and ecclesiastic male superiors for whom women's theological perspectives were offensive and sacrilegious. Similarly, La India María responds to class and social superiors by deferring to her gendered and racialized subalternity; but unlike the intellectual nun, her ignorance is rarely simulated. When unable to operate urban modern technologies, María Nicolasa openly confesses *not to know* or understand such apparatuses. Nonetheless, her "not knowing" and self-declared dumbness allow her to commit certain subversive acts. For example, when a Mexico City traffic officer suggests the lost protagonist seek help at a police station, she retorts smiling, "Ah, I may be dumb, but not stupid." (Ah, pues sí soy tonta, pero no tanto.) The officer clearly offended, she responds with a childlike smile and simulated deference. Her interactions with doña Julia's dead husband are a ruse capitalizing on the stereotype of Native mysticism; and yet, María consistently conceals her artifice as she throws herself into the role of the Indian mystic for the expectant woman. Her gender permits her to indulge in defiance that would be shocking from an aboriginal man. Returning to *Tonta's* dinner scene, the mostly silent protagonist takes vengeance for Lucy's racist insults after the latter asks for "un alón" (a wing); María Nicolasa interprets the request as "un halón" (a big pull) and delivers a viscous jerk to the woman's hair, without repercussions. Banking on her employer's insistence on her aboriginal authenticity and ignorance, María misinterprets Lucy's words and enacts a "literalization" of her request (D'Lugo 2008, 7). Her resistances demonstrate affinities with what James C. Scott (1985, 29) termed subaltern class "weapons of the weak": dissimulation, false compliance, and feigned ignorance. However, María Nicolasa's ignorance-as-shield strategy becomes a double-edged sword as cinematic "Indian" conventions in *Tonta* reduce her to a confused *india* victim rather than social justice champion.

Tonta in the City

Tonta recontextualizes the Indigenista cinema culture clash between Native traditionalism and Western modernity by moving its Indigenous protagonist from a traditional, rural environment to the unfamiliarity of contemporary Mexico City. Turning the aboriginal character into a rural to urban migrant, the film takes up the themes of Mexican identity, the challenges of cultural and economic assimilation, and the dangers of migration—many of the same themes with which Mexican border cinema had preoccupied itself, as evident in depictions of de-Mexicanized *pocho* characters (Iglesias 1985, 9). For working-class women, writes Norma Iglesias, migration represents a potential descent into cultural and moral perdition in which they are susceptible to labor exploitation and a life of *fichera*-style prostitution (1991, 31). Quasi-ethnographic dialogues serve to differentiate la India María from the capital's metropolitanism. This is the case when television variety show host Paco Malgesto chooses to help her find her cousin after a robbery leaves her penniless. In this scene, Malgesto introduces María Nicolasa as "a very humble woman, one of the classic Marías that has come to the Federal District" (una mujer muy humilde, una de las clásicas Marías que llega al Distrito Federal), in this way framing the Mazahua protagonist within the historical and economic experience of 1970s rural-to-urban Indigenous migration and reminding the audience of Mexico City's ubiquitous Mazahua migrant presence. Malgesto alludes to the daily dangers faced by rural migrants when characterizing the theft as an everyday problem. María Nicolasa indeed encounters real social dangers faced by Indigenous women in the megalopolis; in just one day she is robbed, illegally sells produce, begs for money, experiences racial discrimination and sexual assault, and is arrested for vagrancy. Malgesto's introduction also reveals the interstitial existence of the city's Native women, whose participation in the capital's formal and informal economies is well known but who are paradoxically still regarded as other by the city's non-Indigenous inhabitants. María Nicolasa is, in the show host's words, but "one of the classic Marías" residing in the capital and yet the city's very antithesis.

In introducing the rural Mazahua protagonist into a metropolitan space to reproduce the conventional modern/Native culture clash, *Tonta* also reproduces an infantilization of aboriginal characters who come into contact with objects and spaces imbued with a sense of cultural and technological modernity. María Nicolasa, writes Huaco-Nuzum (1992, 144), "is portrayed as infantile and simple minded when confronted with an unpredictable social environment." And the whole city's hustle-and-bustle lifestyle and technology, writes Rohrer (2009, 58), "stand out as a contrast to the cultural 'underdevelopment' of the rural India

María." The would-be Indigenous perspective turns the capital into a confusing and dangerous place and María Nicolasa into an object of easy ridicule on arrival: unfamiliar with traffic lights, she is nearly run over by a car; she confuses a police officer for a mailman, and a paddy wagon, also known as a *julia*, for a woman named Julia. As internal migrants, proposes *Tonta*, the city's Mazahua women may be de jure Mexican but not culturally or linguistically so. Whereas in films by Flaherty, Fernández, and Alazraki, modernity invades traditionally rural aboriginal spaces, *Tonta* inverts this formula so that la India María seems less an aboriginal invader than a Native body in a state of constant environmental assault.

The protagonist's infantilization is based on her aversion to metropolitan technologies and is communicated with physical performances symbolizing incongruity between modern space and Native body. The Mazahua character's comical interactions with urban technology distance her from Mexico's industrial telos and undermine the Indigenous women's ability to participate in the national economy. This strategy is evident in María Nicolasa's attempt at answering a telephone as doña Julia's maid. She responds to her interlocutor: "What? ... And, who's speaking? ... Well it's me, can't you see?!" (¿Eh? ... Y ¿que quién habla? ... Pues yo, ino está usted mirando!) After she accidentally hangs up on Antonio, Lucy's lover and coconspirator, Lucy asks if there are no telephones in San José de los Burros. In her response, the film reverts to the conventional trope tying indigeneity to animality: "In my pueblo there are only burros, cactus patches, lots of land, and lots of need." (En mi pueblo sólo hay burros, nopaleras, muncha tierra y muncha necesidad.) *Tonta* combines María Nicolasa's technological incompetence and puerile expressions—a nervous grin, nodding head, intermittently widening eyes—to illustrate the physical discomfort modern objects trigger in her. When asked if the other women from San José de los Burros are as "burras" (stupid) as her, she responds, "No, girl! There are worse." (¡No, niña! Hay otras peores.) The wordplay between Lucy and La India María, if mildly political, ends in a derisive declaration extending the protagonist's burro stupidity to her pueblo's Native women. Instead of offering up María Nicolasa Cruz as an exceptional picaresque "Indian" figure, the film normalizes the semiotic relationship between "Indianness" and stupidity through her botched contact with contemporary Western technologies.

The same Indigenous representational conventions are in full effect in María Nicolasa's visits to Paco Malgesto's television studio, a setting fraught with technology and modern décor. Refusing to believe that her cousin Eufemia is capable of seeing her, María Nicolasa peers suspiciously and disoriented into the television camera. After the patient Malgesto redirects her toward the camera, she declares her disbelief at the magic of telecommunications: "Can Eufemia really be stuffed inside of there?" (¿Y a poco ahí está metida Eufemia?) While the television camera's incessant gaze harasses her every move, María Nicolasa's response to the studio corroborates a disparity between Native body and Western modernity. Here, Velasco throws herself into physical comedy. When asked to sit in an inflated plastic chair, chic contemporary 1970s furniture, she plunges backward, dropping her crude luggage containers. The camera and audience hound her awkward presence, and her corporal discomfort and emotional shame are on full display in her nervous smiling and extreme docility. But even when María Nicolasa recovers her composure, she settles into a juvenile state of contentment and deference, symbolized again in her exaggerated grin and humble posture.

If, as Rohrer (2017) finds, in Velasco's productions "close-ups are rare," they are nonetheless a typical technique with which to evidence la India María's childish nature. The performance does not suggest a ruse designed to thwart an overwhelming technological adversary. The aboriginal woman's fear and shame are not feigned but are the consequences of a state of continual sensorial assault. Velasco's performance draws on the physical and thematic conventions established in Mexican ethnographic and Indigenista cinema; indeed, hers is the same puerile smile brandished on the faces of Flaherty's Nanook, Alazraki's Mariano, and other Indigenista film actors. A virtuoso actress, Velasco's ignorant and yet lovable "India" offers an exceptionally funny performance. But as a depiction of the Mazahua migrants, Velasco's interpretation justifies the worst Mexican stereotypes of Indigenous subintelligence and cultural underdevelopment, serving as a wink and nod to anti-Indigenous Mexican racism.

The movie's conclusion hastily reassembles its major representational themes and reestablishes the traditional post-revolution relationship between the Mexican state and Indigenous peoples. *Tonta* reconjures the trope of cultural backwardness upon María's return to San José de los Burros. Ordered back home for her own protection, her parents and the Catholic "padrecito" greet María Nicolasa at the San Juan de los Burros train station. Expressing dissatisfaction with her city experience, she nevertheless refers to her minimal education under the auspices of Paco Malgesto: "The only good thing I did in the city was begin to learn to read and write." (Lo único bueno que hice en la ciudad fue que comencé a leer y escribir.) Nonetheless, her education goes unrepresented. Emphasizing the message of Indigenous redemption through education, the protagonist adds: "Well, to fight with the devil one can't continue being an *ignorant Indian woman*."

I'm dumb, dumb, but not that much" (Pos, pa luchar con el diablo no se puede seguir siendo una *india ignorante*. Soy tonta, tonta, pero no tanto) (my emphasis). Here, the film refers not to general rural Mexican's educational shortcomings but to Native ones specifically.

Her return also signals a reappearance of animalization when la India María competes with Filemón in the pueblo's amateur burro races. Despite being recognized as the only woman participant, her first-place victory fails to advance an empowering Native women's agency. Instead, her participation revitalizes the familiar burro-Native equivalency and of "burro" as an epithet for inferior intellect and culture. After winning the four-hundred-peso prize, Paco Malgesto and two police officers arrive in *deus ex machina* fashion to award her a check for fifty thousand pesos for helping solve an international crime in Mexico City (one of her many picaresque city antics). The check, which María Nicolasa is utterly unfamiliar with, is symbolic of the nation's modernizing economy and might have introduced a commentary on non-Indigenous rural economic practices. Instead, María Nicolasa's response to her city-dwelling interlocutors highlights her "Indian" ignorance, incredulously explaining, "What money, if it's just a little piece of paper?!" (*¿Qué dinero, si es un papelito?!*), again forcefully leading the audience to recognize the Indigenous protagonist as an economically unincorporated *burra*.

The film's final sequence acquiesces to the discourse of Indigenous redemption through educational intervention, public education being a state undertaking in postrevolutionary Mexico. To begin with, María Nicolasa unexpectedly donates her winnings toward the establishment of the town's first school. But her decision unabashedly advances the *indio* as burro trope when she explains, "So that we keep the *San José* and knock down the *de los Burros*" (Pa que nos quede lo de San José y nos tumbe lo de los Burros). In this instance, her words racialize the pueblo as a town of dumb "Indians." The movie transitions to María Nicolasa ringing the school bell during the opening of Escuela No 1: San-José. Her inviting expression welcomes not children but adult men and women dressed in typical Indigenous attire: presumably, San José's other burros. *Tonta* ends in the maestro summoning María Nicolasa, who graciously writes "fin" on a chalkboard.

The film's denouement sanctions Mexican ethnographic cinema's colonial-Indigenista discourses promoting Native people's intellectual incompetence and cultural underdevelopment. Having become aware of her own educational inadequacies through her contact with the nation's modern society and economy, la India María returns home to reeducate herself in the national Mexican culture and to redeem her Native counterparts through a program of state-sanctioned education. Like *Maclovia's* don Justo, the finale's maestro represents yet another in a long line of middle-class Mexicans who assume the roles of intermediaries between Indigenous communities and the dominant culture. If la India María effects long-term change in her community, she does it with the same tired solution to the "Indian problem" proposed since early postrevolutionary Mexico. And the specifics remain unclear. Is it the Mexican government that will provide for the *indio's* revindication, as suggested by the school's official-sounding name? Or, should Indigenous Mexicans take redemption into their own hands to draw themselves closer to their mestizo counterparts' dominant culture, as María Nicolasa did upon founding a school? And how reliable are paternalistic intermediaries, represented by characters like the Catholic "padrecito," Paco Malgesto, and the maestro, in Native Mexico's negotiation of non-Indigenous contemporary culture and class hierarchies? *Tonta* leaves these questions unanswered.

Looking Back

As we revisit María Elena Velasco's career we must acknowledge her achievements as actress, director, and savvy entrepreneur. La India María's popularity spans decades, and her films are still consistently televised. Many of Velasco's later works, including the enormously popular *Ni de aquí, ni de allá* (1988), were filmed under her film company, Vlady Pictures. One of few pioneering women filmmakers in Mexico, Velasco successfully "cultivate[d] her own star image independent of the María character, stressing her traits as an intelligent, powerful, and outspoken woman"—traits her Indigenous character generally did not share (Rohrer 2017). In the 1990s, which saw fewer India María film productions, Velasco advocated for Indigenous women, eventually voicing support for EZLN's struggles and women's reproductive rights. However, her work came under attack by President Vicente Fox's Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas for many of the issues outlined in this essay. It would be convenient and uncritical to pin sole blame on Velasco for the racist underpinnings of la India María character. Instead, I have studied la India María's first movie as a product of ethnographic cinema and worked to uncover the ideological, historical, and aesthetic conditions that permitted the character's conception and popularity.

Velasco's India María is symptomatic of how Mexicans had become accustomed to seeing Indigenous counterparts in television and on the big screen by the 1970s. While Velasco's interpretation diverges in

humor and setting from the rural melodrama of Golden Age Mexican cinema, it nonetheless sticks tenaciously to its basic Indigenista conventions. Neither well-educated nor particularly knowledgeable of contemporary culture and technology, la India María remains steadfast and honest, which makes her unlikely triumphs all the more appealing to her audiences. But being *india* is not one of her advantages. Rather, María Nicolasa Cruz persists and overcomes her adversaries despite her indigeneity.

Author Information

Dr. Ariel Zatarain Tumbaga is an educator and researcher of Spanish language and Mexican and Chicana/o literatures and cultures. Born in Navojoa, Sonora, Dr. Tumbaga was raised in the Imperial Valley, California. He holds a PhD in Hispanic Languages and Literatures from UCLA, and has taught courses on language, culture, and literature at UCLA, CSULA, and Southern Oregon University. His research interests are in twentieth-century Mexican and Chicana/o literature and culture, focusing on the representation of indigenous people. He is also pursuing research on race concepts in Mexico, Latin America in general, and Chicana/o society.

References

- Acosta, José de. 1952. *De procuranda indorum salute (Predicación del evangelio en las Indias)*. Introducción, traducción y notas por Francisco Mateos SJ. Madrid: Ediciones España Misionera.
- Bartra, Roger. 1974. "El problema indígena y la ideología indigenista." *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 36 (3): 459–482. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3539488>
- Bonfil Batalla, Guillermo. 1996. *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*. Translated by Philip A. Dennis. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Castro Ricalde, Maricruz. 2004. "Popular Mexican Cinema and Undocumented Immigrants," translated by Emily Hind. *Discourse* 26 (1/2): 194–213. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/dis.2005.0012>
- Castro Ricalde, Maricruz. 2011. "La India María en el cine mexicano: Indígenas, fronteras e inmigración." *Cinemas d'Amérique Latine* 19: 39–52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cinelatino.991>
- D'Lugo, Carol Clark. 2008. "La India Maria vs. Cantinflas and El Santo: Identity Construction within Aspects of Race, Gender, and Class in Popular Mexican Cinema." In *Cine-Lit: Essays on Hispanic Film and Fiction*, edited by Guy H. Wood, 4–16. Corvallis, OR: Cine-Lit Publications.
- Gamio, Manuel. 2010. *Forjando patria: Pro-nacionalismo (Forging a Nation)*. Translated by Fernando Armstrong-Fumero. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2010.
- García Riera, Emilio. 2000. *Historia del cine mexicano*. Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública.
- Hewitt de Alcántara, Cynthia. 1984. *Anthropological Perspectives on Rural Mexico*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Huaco-Nuzum, Carmen. 1992. "Ni de aquí, ni de allá: Indigenous Female Representation in the Films of María Elena Velasco." In *Chicanos and Film: Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance*, edited by Chon A. Noriega, 127–138. New York: Garland.
- Iglesias, Norma. 1985. *La visión de la frontera a través del cine mexicano*. Tijuana: Centro de Estudios Fronterizos del Norte de México.
- Iglesias, Norma. 1991. *Entre yerba, polvo y plomo: Lo fronterizo visto por el cine mexicano*. Vol. 1. Tijuana, México: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.
- Lomnitz, Claudio. 2001. *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ludmer, Josefina. 1984. "Tretas del débil." In *La sartén por el mango: Encuentro de escritoras latinoamericanas*, edited by Patricia Elena González and Elena Ortega, 47–54. Río Piedras: Huracán.
- Monsiváis, Carlos. 2010. *Historia mínima de la cultura mexicana en el siglo XX*, edited by Eugenia Huerta. Mexico City: Colegio de México.
- Monsiváis, Carlos, and Carlos Bonfil. 1994. *A través del espejo: El cine mexicano y su público*. Mexico City: Ediciones Milagro (Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía).
- Mora, Carl J. 1989. *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896–1980*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mora, Sergio de la. 2006. *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Muñoz, María L. O. 2016. *Stand Up and Fight: Participatory Indigenismo, Populism, and Mobilization in Mexico, 1970–1984*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Myers, Kathleen Ann. 2007. *Fernández de Oviedo's Chronicle of America: A New History for a New World*. Translations by Nina M. Scott. Austin: University of Texas Press.

- Pérez Montfort, Ricardo. 2007. *Expresiones populares y estereotipos culturales en México, siglos XIX y XX: Diez ensayos*. Mexico City: CIESAS.
- Pick, Zuzana M. 2010. *Constructing the Image of Mexican Revolution: Cinema and the Archive*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Ramírez-Berg, Charles. 1992. *Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967-1983*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Ramírez-Berg, Charles. 1997. "The Indian Question." In *New Latin American Cinema*, edited by Michael T. Martin, 76–93. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Robles, José Narro, and David Moctezuma Navarro. 2013. "Analfabetismo en México: Una deuda social." *Realidad, Datos, y Espacio: Revista Internacional de Estadística y Geografía* 3 (2013): 5–17.
- Rohrer, Seraina. 2009. "Stereotyping in the Films of La India María." *Journal of Latino-Latin American Studies* 3 (3): 54–68. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18085/llas.3.3.u013g71801116802>
- Rohrer, Seraina. 2017. *La India María: Mexploitation and the Films of María Elena Velasco*. Austin: University of Texas Press. Kindle.
- Rony, Fatimah Tobing. 1996. *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1220m5f>
- Saldaña-Portillo, María Josefina. 2016. *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822374923>
- Santa Ana, Otto, and Claudia Parodi. 1998. "Modeling the Speech Community: Configuration and Variable Types in the Mexican Spanish Setting." *Language in Society* 27 (1): 23–51. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500019710>
- Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Tierney, Dolores. 2007. *Emilio Fernández: Pictures in the Margins*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Valencia Zamudio, Valeria. 2016. "Humor and Speech Racialization in La India María's Movies: 'Ni de aquí, ni de allá', 'Okey, Mister Pancho' and 'Ni Chana, ni Juana.'" In *Os sentidos do humor: Possibilidades de análise do cômico*. São Paulo: Edições Verona.
- Valenzuela Arce, J. M. 1998. *Nuestros piensos: Culturas populares en la frontera México-Estados Unidos*. Mexico City: Dirección General de Culturas Populares-CONACULTA.

How to cite this article: Tumbaga, Ariel Zatarain. 2020. *Indios y burros: Rethinking "la India María" as Ethnographic Cinema*. *Latin American Research Review* 55(4), pp. 759–772. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.646>

Submitted: 15 June 2018

Accepted: 21 July 2019

Published: 22 December 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

LARR

Latin American Research Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

OPEN ACCESS 