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Mr. Downing, the Translocal Narrator: History and Travel Writing in Todd Downing's *The Mexican Earth*

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Abstract

This article posits that Native American Todd Downing's history and travelogue, *The Mexican Earth* (1940), represents a translocal narrator who moves between Western textual traditions while writing about Indigenous Mexico. In this way, Downing offers an interesting literary example to think about the connections between American Indian and Latin American Indigenous cultures. To contemplate this connection, I link Sonia E. Álvarez's concept of the translocal with Gerald Vizenor's concept of transmotion to interpret Downing's text. In this article, I illustrate how the author is in conversation with several of the primary sources that the author draws upon to write the history, in addition to his firsthand encounters interacting with, and observing, people to highlight the travel-writing genre on his work. The text offers an extraordinary lens to read the history of Mexico, then in the throes of their 1930s nationalist drive, as an Indigenous history with a rich past and a continued living presence.

Keywords

Indigeneity, Mexico, Travel Writing, Translocal, Transmotion, Pan-American Highway

The Mexican Earth, originally published in 1940, offers an extraordinary account of the history of Mexico written and narrated from the perspective of an American Indian traveler in the late 1930s. Todd Downing (Choctaw) was an accomplished writer and intellectual whose body of work consists in large part of crime fiction. *The Mexican Earth* represents Downing's only historical text, although I use this term loosely because even though Downing drew from multiple primary sources to write *The Mexican Earth*, he foregrounds its traveling narrator to do so. His traveling narrator is satirical, optimistic, and deeply knowledgeable of Mexican literature and literature about Mexico. The text begins with its present moment, the late 1930s, and overviews key moments of the country's pre-Columbian, colonial, and nation-building history. Given its historical context, the text is rooted in the transnational politics of the 1930s, a time that also offers a unique optic to explore Indigenous-to-Indigenous connections in the Americas.

When the text was republished in 1996, the editor, Wolfgang Hochbruck, included a bibliography of the primary sources that Todd Downing used to write this history. This second publication of the text has been crucial to its recuperation. James H. Cox has been the most significant contributor to recovering and interpreting Downing's work, and he does so within a tradition of American Indian Literary Nationalism. This article builds upon Cox's and Hochbruck's work to examine how Downing mixes history writing and travel writing and what this means for American Indian Literature, Indigenous Literatures, and Chicana/o and Latin American literary studies. To work through this theoretical and disciplinary matrix, I turn to Sonia E. Álvarez's notion of the translocal and Gerald Vizenor's notion of transmotion to call attention to the ways that Downing's work mediates and translates between multiple textual and living geographies. Through this movement, Downing mediates between English-language and Spanish-language literary traditions on the one hand, and a living, Indigenous Mexican history—a "México profundo" to use Bonfil Batalla's term—on the other hand.¹ Through the self-conscious fashioning of an American Indian narrator, Downing works through an inherited and mediated Western literary history of Mexico by undercutting it with immediate firsthand knowledge based on the narrator's travels and translocal positionality. As a traveling history, *The Mexican Earth* thus registers an alternative narrative of Mexican history as an Indigenous Mexican history and retains enduring relevance in its anticipation of a comparative, *trans-Indigenous*² turn in scholarship of the Americas.

The Translocal and Transmotion

Cox's body of criticism is the most important source for critical engagement with Downing's *The Mexican Earth*. Cox argues that the text posits a two-fold claim: in the first place, the text maps an "indigenous nation to indigenous nation relationship within Mexico and between Mexico and the United States" (I 75). Through this mapping, Downing insists on maintaining tribal specificity when interpreting history at the same time that he posits a sense of intertribal kinship based on the land. In his book, Cox argues that *The Mexican Earth* partakes in an American Indian tradition in nonfiction writing of diplomacy characterized by an emphasis on representing American Indians and on establishing good relations within and across multiple political arenas. Cox insightfully supports this approach through a paradigm of American Indian Literary Nationalism that privileges tribal-centric work and political advocacy. By focusing on diplomacy, Cox distances his theoretical approach from the cultural emphasis of James H. Ruppert's concept of mediation, which is defined as a critical and aesthetic method of drawing from Native and Western systems of meaning making. Like mediation,

however, Cox argues that diplomacy requires one to “not alienate her audience” while “[advocating] for a specific position” (R 113). Within this discussion of mediation and diplomacy, the authors share a central premise that American Indian authored texts navigate between Western and Native literary forms and knowledges.

The Mexican Earth highlights an interesting problematic within this paradigm. Rather than tribal-centric and advocative, the text is translational in that an American Indian writer represents and celebrates Indigenous peoples and histories outside of the geographic bounds of the U.S. nation-state. To get at this problematic, I turn to important work by Álvarez. This move to Latin American Feminist theory reflects my own positionality as a Mexican American woman reading Downing’s work. At the same time, Downing’s literary project requires this additional lens given the nature of his traveling narrator and his sustained intellectual interest in Indigenous Mexico. In her introduction to *Translocalities/Translocalidades*, Álvarez describes the anthology as an exploration of the “multidimensional crossings and movements” of Latin/a feminist discourses and practices (2). Shaped by “translocal” subjects, that is, researchers who shift across geographies and subject positions, she describes their nickname and metaphor, the *translocas* as an expression of their physical dislocation and the conceptual madness that arises from it (3).³ The metaphor represents “the movement of bodies, texts, capital, and theories in between North/South and [reflects] the mobile epistemologies they inspire...” (Álvarez 3). When I use the term translocal within the context of *The Mexican Earth*, I use it to describe the multiplicity of subject positions that Mr. Downing, the narrator, moves through; it is a subject position that emphasizes movement across physical, textual, and temporal locations and the embodied and epistemological work of translation to represent this engagement.

The Mexican Earth bridges American Indian Literature and Latin American Studies, a feature that has its roots in the author’s sustained interest in the history and literature of Mexico, particularly Indigenous Mexico. Downing was born in 1902 in Atoka, in the Choctaw Nation (Indian Territory). He studied Latin American literature and history and earned B.A. and M.A. degrees while at the University of Oklahoma at Norman. After his studies, he worked in the Department of Modern Languages as a Spanish instructor and reviewed books in Spanish, Italian, and French for *Books Abroad*, a journal that was later renamed *World Literature Today*. During the summer months of the late 1920s and early 1930s, Downing served as a tour guide in Mexico. The experience and observations he gained while there inform his crime fiction and *The Mexican Earth*. As Cox notes, Downing was deeply moved by the murder of two Mexican college students in Ardmore, Oklahoma in 1931 (M 641). Following this local act of police violence, he published his first detective novel *Murder on Tour*. In his

crime fiction, which does not feature Indigenous narrators, Downing would specialize in organized crime and murder in Mexico. This interest, as Cox argues, was part of his project to demystify Indigenous and Mexican criminality and expose neocolonial violence.⁴

Angela Wilson Cavender offers insight into this discussion of translation between American Indian and Latin American studies. In her critique of the field of American Indian history in the late 1990s, she admonishes the field for ignoring oral traditions, tribal and family historians, and for privileging what is a written body of work from white male perspectives. She calls this kind of history, “non-indian perceptions of American Indian history” (3). She argues that direct engagement with tribal communities can validate historians’ perspectives and more aptly reflect American Indian history. When applied to *The Mexican Earth*, we see that Downing draws from both Spanish-language and English-language sources for his research materials. Even more so, *The Mexican Earth* was published in English by Doubleday, Doran, and Co., so whose Indigenous history is being served by his intervention? Because Downing works through non-Native sources in English and Spanish, the narrator’s travel anecdotes become Downing’s way to read against the grain and validate Indigenous presences and perspectives. As we will see from the textual evidence presented in the following sections, Downing writes with a sense of skepticism and satire that comes from the narrator’s firsthand interactions, observations, and from his positionality as an American Indian. The narrator measures texts against each other and against his own experience in the U.S. and Mexico. Like Ruppert’s formulation of a mediator with a particular social task, Downing’s narrator is much more than a translator in the narrowest sense of the term as someone equipped with the linguistic skills to convey information from one language into another. The narrator as mediator is pushing intellectual and literary traditions in two languages with the task of illuminating these non-Native writers about Indigenous Mexico.

For example, Downing quotes from and offers a brief commentary of John Hubert Cornyn’s translation of *The Song of Quetzalcoatl*, originally written by the Texcocoan, pre-Columbian poet Nezahualcoyotl. Downing’s literary criticism is brief but manages to illuminate his translocal method. Before I turn to the translation, it is worth noting how Downing sets up this move. Structurally, Downing splices his commentary amidst a larger chapter about the rise of Mesoamerican civilizations and the origins and uses of corn. Noting that “most visitors from the United States” have yet to develop a taste for the tortilla, he offers a beautifully rendered description of the tortilla: “It is not the taste of the corn alone, but also that of the lime which impregnates it. The stone of the *metate* on which the *nixtamal* was ground adds something, as does the clay of the *comal* on which it was baked, the

smoke of wood or charcoal” (25). Although Downing italicizes all Spanish-language terms throughout the text, his use of italics in this passage is two-fold. First, the Spanish-language words enhance the detailed, sensory experience to give the reader a sense of the narrator’s authority on the topic. The reader knows that the narrator must have actual experience eating a tortilla and knowledge of the tortilla making process.⁵ In this instance, the detail signifies his pleasure in the food and thus differentiates the narrator from “most visitors” on this issue. Second, these italics are of Spanish-language terms with Náhuatl origins (*métatl*, *nextamalli*, *comalli*). Downing expects his erudite reader to connect tortillas, a staple of the Mexican diet (and cuisine), to its Indigenous origins.

Thus, Downing carefully establishes his narrator’s authority before offering his brief criticism of the translation. The narrator moves from his firsthand experience eating tortillas to its representation in literature. As if it were an aside, he introduces the poem with his commentary: “*Tortillas* are the “bread” of the early Mexican poet...” (25).

Oh, my mother, when I die

Bury me beneath your hearth.

When you go to make the bread

There is where you’ll cry for me. (Emphasis mine 25)

Downing does not explicitly comment on the merit of Cornyn’s translation. Rather, he suggests that the translator’s metrical decision does not adequately reflect Nezahualcoyotl’s meaning. Bread is literally and symbolically different from tortillas and reflects Cornyn’s not Nezahualcoyotl’s reality. Through this small act of literary criticism, Downing mediates between the translation and the “original” text vis-à-vis the translocal narrator. In this example, Downing’s knowledge of Indigenous and Mexican practices contributes to his ability to illuminate the text and his reader. His move is an important revisionist one that gives priority to establishing cultural particulars. If we assume that Downing’s implied reader is monolingual with an interest in Mexico we can still appreciate this example of mediation as a corrective strategy. The reader need only know that bread is not the same as tortillas to understand his criticism of the translation.

By bringing this translocal lens to my reading of the text, I seek to highlight the way that Downing enacts and produces transmotion. Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) defines transmotion as a Native, storied presence that moves across time and forms. Downing, through the narrator’s movement across the epistemological spaces of literary texts and the physical and cultural geography of Mexico, produces a Native, storied presence. This transmotion makes Indigenous Mexican peoples and their histories central to the formation of the contemporary nation-state. While one might argue

that this move is assimilatory, assimilating Indigenous Mexicans into a colonizing nation-state, Downing's assimilatory move is a response to his optimism about the political changes he sees during the Cárdenas regime (1934-1940), a point that I will turn to in the final section.

Indigenous Travel Writing: Along the Pan-American Highway

While Downing may see an extended homeland in Mexico, as Cox argues, the narrator is not at home. Through crafting an American Indian narrator as traveler, Downing asserts the narrator's *foreignness* even as he posits a shared sense of indianness, constructing a translocal narrator.⁶ Moreover, through mixing history and travel writing, Downing works within and challenges a genre of travel writing by Anglo-American and Anglo-European writers in Mexico. He is at once explicit about this move through a system of direct reference and citation, but Downing also mocks the tradition by putting the foreign traveler under the author's Native gaze.

Sixty years before James Clifford gave his now famous paper about recovering the category of travel from its colonialist legacy in the nineteenth-century, Anglo-European traveler, Downing set out on his own revisionist project. When we examine Downing's sources, we see that he was widely read in a growing body of anthropological research on Mexico by American writers Frederick Starr, Robert Redfield, and Frances Toor as well as in the journalistic fieldwork of John Reed. Although Downing pokes fun at the field and the amateur anthropologist, it is a growing body of travel writing (fiction and non-fiction) by Anglo-European writers that most interests the detective writer- turn- traveling historian. Drawing from Mrs. Alec Tweedie's *Mexico as I Saw It*, Aldous Huxley's *Beyond the Mexique Bay*, and D.H. Lawrence's novel *The Plumed Serpent* (all English writers), Downing seems set to write back to an often-condescending tradition of white, European travel writers. From Cortés, von Humboldt, Tweedie, and Huxley, Downing's move to posit an Indigenous view further posits an "American" view of Mexico. As a Choctaw writer and an American Indian, Downing configures the Indigenous, traveling narrator to re-inscribe a Pan-American perspective prior to the nation-state and rooted in a continental, anti-colonialist understanding of American identity.

Downing begins at the border, and like Aldous Huxley's *Beyond the Mexique Bay*, Downing begins with irony and wit.⁷ The text begins with the narrator crossing the border into Mexico via Laredo and meditating on the applicability of the phrase "el primer paso al otro lado" ("the first step on the other side")⁸ to name a bar. By pointing out the irony of bar names, Downing points out the reality of the border; his narrator crosses in a car, interacting with immigration officers on both sides; he moves between two jurisdictions. The literal and figurative first step into either side is movement

across and within a legal and political apparatus that works to obfuscate Indigenous kinship and citizenship. The first step on either side is, in this legal sense, the same. At the same time, Downing's meditation on the term is ironic as he renders a particular form of modern transport into Mexico. The narrator is *driving* into Mexico through Texas; there is simply no first "step" into Mexico. Unlike his literary predecessor, Tweedie traveled into Mexico in 1900, first traveling through Texas and continuing the journey by train, particularly in private cars. Huxley began his trip by ocean steam liner, first stopping in the Caribbean and traveling into Mexico by way of Central America; his journey was a mix of ship, train, and *burro* rides. These three travelers employ modern modes of transportation (*burro* aside), but whereas Tweedie praised the English-owned railway lines, Downing begins his narrative along the Pan-American Highway;⁹ the first step on the other side resonating with a shared sense of geography and nomenclature heightened by the vehicle and the construction of good roads.

From the outset, Downing works to demystify notions of Mexican criminality. Working through the border traffic into Mexico, the narrator overhears a conversation between U.S. immigration officers about a recent shooting in Mexico between the police and federal police over jurisdiction (precisely the issue his American Indian traveler foregrounds with his drive into Mexico). The narrator apologizes for recounting the story, aware of the power of narration to replicate stereotypes. He writes, "Now as one who has criticized press and motion pictures in the United States for giving a wild-West touch to things Mexican, let me say that I cite this incident because it is unusual and, I think, too good to pass up" (2). The narrator describes that while Mexico was dangerous during the Revolutionary war (1910-1920), it was no longer the case. Contesting Mexican criminality at the outset, he writes: "One has to dodge no more bullets on the Mexican side of the international bridge than on ours" (3). While the narrator specifically calls out the motion picture industry, this example offers a powerful counterpoint to both Tweedie's and Huxley's account of Mexico. Throughout the portions of the text wherein Huxley travels through Mexico, he repeats the idea that the Indigenous peoples (the natives) save the little money they have to buy guns for their endless feuds and vendettas. During her first night in Mexico, incidentally on a ranch in northern Mexico, Tweedie fears the Indigenous peasants rising with guns and machetes; she repeats references to "villainous" faces and criminality.¹⁰ One can only surmise Downing's reaction to these representations of Indigenous Mexicans as particularly violent. These first few pages of *The Mexican Earth* confirm the narrator's outsider position as a U.S. citizen traveling south, but it also reveals his insider knowledge of the nation-state. It is clear that he has traveled before and will not consume the story as evidence of either a dangerous or a romantic country.

Travel is an important part of the author's biography as well as an important trope and epistemological tool. In *The Mexican Earth*, the narrator (like the author) is well-traveled in Mexico, and the Pan-American Highway functions as a device to narrate Mexican history. That Downing uses the highway to create connections across time and space is significant and reflects the optimism of the late 1930s. For Huxley, writing in the early part of the decade, the Pan-American Highway was only a naïve idea. On the road from Oaxaca City to Etna, Huxley writes: "The road was a section of that hypothetical Pan-American Highway which is, someday, to link New York with Lima, or, more modestly, with Panama, or yet more modestly, with Guatemala City" (284). Huxley mocks the idea of a vast highway system and figuratively shrinks the idea down to size. Downing's narrator, on the other hand, is a motorist enjoying the road. As he travels on the Pan-American Highway, he dwells on what he observes and on what he has read.

While driving from Nuevo Laredo to Monterrey, for example, Mr. Downing works through the various metaphors that have been used to describe the map of Mexico. He begins, "people are always disagreeing about Mexico so they disagree on what the country looks like" (4). Animal, leg of mutton, cornucopia, boot, "sombrero dented at the crown," the narrator calls attention to the fraught (and often humorous) processes of observation and interpretation (4-5). Within this ongoing conversation, the narrator seems to settle on the proposition that Mexico is like a mountain, a metaphor that allows him to call upon an Indigenous interpretation: "A Mexican pyramid is an imitation of a mountain, a mountain made symmetrical" (5). Here, the narrator references the Pyramid of the Sun in the Valley of Mexico, a human-made "mountain" constructed by Indigenous peoples thousands of years ago. The narrator intervenes in the discussion, weighing in on the side of Indigenous labor and the land. The figurative statement that Mexico looks *like* a mountain posits an epistemological truth: We know what Mexico looks like when we examine the labor and land that make it so.

Along the journey, the narrator traces a similar path that Indigenous peoples from the North would have taken. His route on the Pan-American Highway compresses time as it connects his journey with those before him. Elaborating on the pyramid metaphor, Downing describes the rise (and fall) of Mesoamerica in pyramidal terms: built "layer by layer" through the cultural advancements of the peoples spanning this geography, its peak was southern Mexico (22-23). In this section, Downing refers to the peoples as "immigrants," migrating southward thousands of years ago from the Bering Strait. Citing J Eric Thompson's *Mexico Before Cortez* (1933), Downing also calls these immigrants "tourists." He writes: "If Mexico is the ideal summer and winter resort now, it was then. Tourists

came a-vagabonding into Mexico. They were so pleased with what they found that they did what tourists still want to do: they settled down” (23). By identifying these first peoples as migrants and tourists, a point he elaborates on with the example of the Maya, he makes travel a constitutive part of Indigenous identity. We get a deeper sense of how the geographic space became populated over time and how migrants become Indigenous to a place over millennia. Referring to the Zapotec oral tradition, Downing writes of the Maya: “...they can scarcely have sprung, as the Zapotecs of Oaxaca boasted of themselves, from rocks and trees” (28). Downing’s attention to early waves of migration highlights an ancient North-South circuit. The motorist’s journey recreates the southward movement into present-day Mexico. In this sense, Downing might very well try to offer a counterpoint to the reality of the border. In its attempt to fix people in their places, the border is but a new construction along a well-trodden circuit.

Continuing on his travels, the narrator is afforded opportunities to comment on other tourists. This trope is distinctly absent in Tweedie’s and Huxley’s work where the Native (in its broadest sense) is under scrutiny.¹¹ In Downing’s text, the critique of the tourist lends him critical distance and is represented as a function of his Indigenous identity. In one example, Mr. Downing identifies the racist who pretends to be free of prejudice: “in Mexico... [he] waxes sentimental over every pot in a market place, defective or not, simply because it is Indian. His words do not ring true to an Indian of Oklahoma. I doubt that they do to an Indian of Mexico” (9). In this example, the narrator identifies his Indigenous identity for the first time. The narrator’s identity enters into the frame because it has shaped his perceptions of the American tourist’s reactions. He is skeptical of the overt overvalorization of Indigenous crafts as a form of paternalism, and imagines that his Indigenous Mexican neighbor and kin can too.

When Downing calls attention to the Indigenous narrator a second time, he undermines the tourist’s facile observation about phenotype. Indeed, some of the most troublesome aspects of Huxley’s and Tweedie’s work is their cruel descriptions of Indigenous and mestizo peoples’ physical characteristics, which Downing dismantles with wit. Leaving Victoria, the capital of Tamaulipas, the narrator notes:

When a lady, whose eyesight may possibly have been better than mine asked if I had noticed “how much darker the natives get at the Tropic of Cancer,” I assured her that I had noted this phenomenon; in fact, my bare forearm, resting on the car door, had begun to take on a deeper tan as we passed a white post into the torrid zone. I have no doubt her observation was figuratively true at least, for here Indian elements in

mestizo culture must greatly outnumber Spanish, and the influence of Texas is felt no more. (12)

The narrator's joke works because of the way he transforms the adjective "darker" into its verb form. The sun, in this climate, darkens all. While the lady's observation may simply be descriptive, the narrator's joke dismantles the assumed connection between phenotype and so-called immutable ethnic traits. This example is particularly noteworthy because Downing undermines skin color as a direct and immutable marker of identity. The woman in this passage humorously resembles Tweedie's many comments about the "natives" and their physical characteristics. Having traveled with her Kodak, Tweedie includes several photographs of Mexican and Indian "types." Downing is trying to move beyond visual cues to a discussion about Indigenous identity outside the frame of race while tackling the issue of racism head on (as in the example of the American tourist and pottery). In subsequent passages, examined below and in the next section, we see how Downing elaborates on this cultural and land-based understanding of Indigenous and mestizo identity.

In another example of the Anglo-American tourist, Downing draws attention to a North-South cultural primitivism. He writes that the narrator met a young woman from California who was "ecstatic about Indians: their handicrafts, their babies, their politeness, their musical voices, everything. She was studying indigenous art and folk dances and the Aztec language in the summer school of the National University of Mexico" (9). In this example, the narrator uses indirect speech to report on the Californian's enthusiasm in contrast to the use of quoted speech in the previous two examples. This strategy helps the narrator elaborate on her conversation while mocking it. Thus, when he describes that she "joined" an Indian family for lunch and ate their tortillas, he adds the parenthetical comment in his own voice: "(‘horned in on,’ I would have said)" (9). He casts doubt on her choice of words, and by extension the very way she understood her interaction with the family. The Californian claims she would love to live in Mexico and "thinks it's wonderful—the way [Indians] are coming into their own" (9). Once the narrator has fully established her enthusiasm, dedication, and imposition, he asks, "You have Indians out in California, don't you?" (10). The narrator observes: "She frowned," before she claimed: "Oh, that's different. They're not—well, yes, I guess they are the same race. But —" (10). The Californian does not notice California Indians. On the one hand, they are too close to home; they are Californian, living on the northern side of the border. On the other hand, they are also invisible. Tellingly, this example reveals just how the translocal narrator disrupts non-Native perceptions of Indigenous peoples. The American Indian traveling in Mexico calls out the Californian's erasure of a

living Native presence in the North. In doing so, the narrator insists on transmotion on both sides of the border.

Downing launches his socio-cultural definition of indigeneity as a response to the anecdote of the Californian. The narrator is jarred by the Californian's reference to race, and his host tries to diffuse the situation. The host claims, "she was just kidding you, of course. She knew all the time that you're an Indian yourself" (10). The narrator explains that people as the Californian (the Miss Blanks of the world) ought to think of the white, mestizo, and indio categories as "psychological" rather than racial. Through narrating a parable of three brothers, the narrator explains that one's identity is created through place, family, language, and exterior markers like clothing. The narrator chooses the term psychological because he sees each brother identifying with their different families; one thinks he is white because he grew up thinking so, speaking Spanish, living in the city, and so forth, while the other two brothers undergo mental processes relevant to their social environments. Downing offers concrete examples of his explanation: Benito Juarez was "Indian," Santa Anna was "white," and Porfirio Díaz was "mestizo" (11). The narrator reveals identity as a complex web of factors, including actions and motivations; this focus goes beyond essentializing one's phenotypic difference and reveals race as a social construct.

Travel writing in *The Mexican Earth* foregrounds the narrator's difference, and provides an optic from which the narrator explores the implications of racialized difference. Acknowledging that he is an "Indian from Oklahoma," the narrator recognizes that he is a traveler in another country, and as a traveler, he is constituted in power relations differently. At the same time, the narrator acknowledges a shared indigeneity rooted in the land and history, and a familiarity with Mexico based on his extensive travel. As a literary strategy, the narrator is transformed into the reader's tour guide, translating Mexico and Indigenous Mexico for the English-speaking audience- translating and enacting transmotion.

Of Its Time and Beyond: the 1930s Optic

Downing's fictional travelogue chronicles Mexican history at the same time that it is shaped by its own historical moment of the late 1930s. As we saw in the previous section, *indigenista* politics and the discursive frame of *mestizaje* pervade Downing's text but these discussions were but one part of a larger discourse on race during the early-twentieth century. What we see is a layered engagement with history. First, *The Mexican Earth*, like other English-language books on Mexico, offers an outside look into Mexico's historical, political, and cultural formation. Second, Downing's text works at the

linguistic margins of a contested, intellectual terrain in which Mexican scholars argued about the nature of Mexico and of Mexicans- a debate with its own intellectual history. Third, when Downing writes about race and culture in Mexico, he is keenly aware that the Western world is erupting precisely along these lines. In other words, at this time race is the dominant way of understanding people's relations to each other, even if it is an ideological construct obfuscating class, gender, and religious dynamics.

A cursory look at the sources he drew from to write *The Mexican Earth* reveals his engagement with an intellectual and literary tradition that could have benefitted, in its time, from an Indigenous perspective. Notable scholarly sources in Spanish include Andrés Molina Enríquez's *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (*The Great National Problems*) (1909), Manuel Gamio's *Forjando Patria* (*Forging a Nation*) (1916), and Alfonso Caso's *Instituciones precortesianas* (*Pre-Columbian Institutions*) (1934). Likewise, William H. Prescott's *The Conquest of Mexico* (1895), Carleton Beals's *Porfirio Díaz* (1932), and Frank Tannenbaum's *Peace by Revolution* (1933) inform *The Mexican Earth*. Downing was also well read in the Spanish *crónicas* and in Mexican literature; he references Alfonso Reyes's *Visión de Anahuac* (*Vision of Anahuac*) (1923), Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* (*The Underdogs*) (1929), and Martín Luis Guzmán's *El águila y la serpiente* (*The Eagle and the Serpent*) (1930).

It was not lost on Downing that Mexican intellectuals were in the throes of constructing a Mexican nationalism set on assimilating the Indian. A large part of this discussion, as we saw in the preceding section, was about a nation's "people" or "ethnic unity". Through a detailed study of class and racial stratification and governance inherited since the colonial-era, Andrés Molina Enríquez's *Los grandes problemas nacionales* advances the thesis that Mexico's Indigenous populations needed to be better integrated into society. In his writing, mestizos were a distinct social group, which was later elevated in the post-revolutionary period as the ideal Mexican citizen. Molina Enríquez's writing on the mestizo reflects a mixed view of the mestizo that nonetheless embraces his revolutionary spirit. Molina Enríquez writes: "el tipo de mestizo era y es tipo de raza inferior" ("the mestizo type was and is of inferior race") (43). He is "vulgar, rudo, desconfiado, inquieto e impetuoso; pero terco, fiel, generoso y sufrido. Nada puede identificarlo mejor que la palabra con que fue bautizado por la gente decente: chicano...desarrapado" ("vulgar, rude, untrustworthy, restless and impetuous; but stubborn, loyal, generous, long suffering. Nothing can identify him better than with the word the decent people baptized him: chicano... shabby") (43). For Molina Enríquez, there is no choice but to hand over the nation to the mestizo as neither the criollo nor the Indigenous elements would be patriotic enough, their ties conceivably to other political formations. He continues:

si el elemento mestizo es el elemento más fuerte, más numeroso y más patriota del país en él debe continuar el gobierno de la nación; si en él está la patria verdadera, entregar la dirección de los destinos nacionales a cualquiera otro de los elementos de la población es poco menos que hacer traición a la patria. (if the mestizo element is the strongest, most numerous, and most patriotic element of the nation then it is here that the government of the nation should continue; if in this element lies the truest patriot, to hand over the nation's destiny to any other element is little less than betraying the nation.) (309)

The historical gap between Molina Enríquez's text and Downing's text is thirty years, a long time when considering the fall of the Díaz regime, the Mexican Revolutionary War, and the immediate nation-building efforts of the 1920s. Even though Molina Enríquez would offer Downing an intellectual lens to view Mexican culture, which manifests in his use of the source, Downing departs from Molina Enríquez's view on Mexican race-relations. Downing sees mestizaje as a much more social process. Whereas Molina Enríquez is quick to break up peoples into elements with specific character traits, a characteristic of the positivist thinking of the turn of the century, Downing emphasizes how contact and trade shaped communities and cultural norms. In addition, he sees that this process has been much more thorough in northern Mexico. He writes: "...the more accessible a region is, the more thorough has been the mingling of blood and cultures" (11).

A major factor influencing Downing's musings on race and ethnic identity is the rise of Nazism in Europe. He writes: "Indian. *Mestizo*. White. In these days of so much chest thumping and shouting in parade-ground voices about race, it seems futile to try to get in a sane word on the subject" (9). As Downing was writing the text in the late 1930s, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi troops were advancing their genocidal war in Europe against Jews and other ethnic minorities, which he references through parading and shouting. Within this context, Downing sees racialized thinking as violent and maddening. Like his predecessor, José Vasconcelos, Downing was writing against Aryanism and white privilege. Because ethnic identity was a major way of conceptualizing a nation, this tension plays out in Downing's handling of the subject. Indian, mestizo, and white become "psychological" traits and mestizaje an inevitable outcome of contact and trade. Nevertheless, we have seen how Downing's own worldview as a Choctaw contributed to shaping a narrator with the ability to see through indigenista rhetoric and denounce racism. In contrast to Vasconcelos's argument of privileging mestizaje as a response to Aryanism, Downing's work on race deconstructs it. He looks more closely at diversity, fitting the pieces together to show "communities... in the making" (24). As a travelogue,

Downing's narrator is expected to write about and interpret what he sees. The satire and irony we see working in the text help him to acknowledge and demystify racist thinking while trying to reach a more nuanced understanding of diversity.

Downing's narrator dispels overt nationalist claims that Mexico ought to be a mestizo nation because he has a nuanced view about mestizo-Indigenous connections. His firsthand experience traveling through the land and the affinity he constructs with Indigenous peoples on both sides of the border predispose him to read the established rhetoric about race. The text gets more complicated in discussions about nation-building and its relationship to the past. To unpack this idea, I turn to Manuel Gamio's *Forjando Patria*, another one of Downing's sources about Mexico. Published in 1916, *Forjando Patria* was and continues to be a seminal text about Mexican nation building. Downing refers to Gamio, "the dean of Mexican anthropologists" and his fieldwork several times in the book: his research in Veracruz about religious syncretism¹² and in Teotihuacán in a project that included excavation and community projects.¹³ In *Forjando Patria*, Gamio advances the claim that Mexico can build a nation if it assimilates the Indian, which previous attempts by colonialists and creole nationalists throughout Latin America had failed to do. In his opening chapter, Gamio likens nation-building to sculpture; with wrought prose, he describes how the people needed to mix both the bronze and iron elements of their culture to create a statue that could remain upright. Gamio, a student of anthropology under Franz Boas, believed that anthropological research, particularly ethnology, was central to the nation-building process. As he describes, there had been little to no anthropological research of Mexico's Indigenous populations. How then could the minority population effectively incorporate the heterogeneous majority? Gamio postulated that the four conditions for national identity: (1) ethnic unity (2) a common language (3) moral, religious, political, and aesthetic cultural cohesion across classes, and (4) a shared history were notably absent throughout Latin America. Gamio believed that Mexico ought to claim a shared history in its Indigenous populations' pre-Columbian past. He laments that pre-Columbian history was not taken seriously, and gives us an indication of the nature of research and education on the topic. Arguing that the history of the pre-Columbian past must be written, he writes: "Regarding the civilizations that inhabited Mexico before the Conquest, these prejudices against the Indian race are so great that they have contributed to an erroneous, fantastic, and inadmissible account of our own history. Even the facts presented in our textbooks are often erroneous, lacking in historical perspective, and presented without scientific methodology" (40).¹⁴

If Downing's history worked as nationalist history, it would, even in its day, offer a trans-Indigenous perspective, demonstrating how Gamio's goal of "unity" (a code for mestizaje in this context) was unlikely. Downing describes the history of the land that would become Mexico as a multi-tribal geography. *The Mexican Earth* begins its look at Mexico's pre-Columbian history with an inclusive look at the peoples shaping the "pyramid." Downing sees plurality in the pre-Columbian past. Downing delves into the Maya migrations southward ("some time in the first millennium BC") and back northwards into Yucatán ("between 530 and 629 A.D.") (29, 32). In this description, Downing summarizes the Mayan calendric system and refers to stele to trace the movement northwards. In addition to his look at the Mayan past, he recognizes that Tarascans, Zapotecs, and Toltecs were living in the same period and influencing each other's cultures. Downing's brief look at the pre-Columbian past would extend the Mexican nation-state's focus on an Aztec-past. Rather than relying on a mythical interpretation of the past that can be used to elevate one group over another in the name of ethnic unity, Downing draws on the historical and scientific research of his day to account for a fuller and more complex look at the history of Indigenous Mexico and the way it works into the present.

Just as Downing draws attention to traveling and simultaneity in the past, the narrator intersects the past with the present. In one of his many traveling anecdotes, the narrator recounts a humorous twist to the narrative of a continuous history. Downing writes, "A tourist turned resident took her Indian cook to see the exhibits in the prehistoric cemetery. The Indian was unresponsive until she spied a particular grinding stone. That brought a delighted cry from her. She wanted to handle it; she begged her mistress to buy it for use in her kitchen. 'The very *metate* I have been looking for! If I had it I could make such beautiful little *tortillas*'" (28). Downing inserts this anecdote into a discussion about the archeological findings from the lava in Cuicuilco (in the Valley of Mexico). Downing packs an overwhelming power dynamic into this brief anecdote in terms of the relationship between the elite, naturalized but foreign, woman and the Indigenous woman "help." When read within the context of excavations and history writing, the anecdote speaks to the way that this process of "invention" was removed from the day-to-day experience of Indigenous peoples living in Mexico. Because excavations and research into the pre-Columbian past were meant to "invent" nation-state history, the Indigenous woman's responses are particularly revealing. She is not too amused by the prehistoric "cemetery" meant to display the dead as a token of nationalist patrimony. As a reader, I wonder if she wanted to go with her "boss" the mistress/head of household in the first place. In contrast to the cemetery itself, she is interested in the *metate*, the stone grinder she would use as the Indian cook in that household. What did she see in its size, shape, and depth to elicit such a response? The *metate*

speaks to the Indigenous woman's workplace needs because, from what we can infer, it was well made. Rather than locating continuity in pyramids as symbols of power, the *metate* locates tradition in technologies, practices, and food.

In terms of linguistic and ethnic unities, Downing describes linguistic plurality and cross-border affinity. As he travels southward, Downing discusses the various language groups associated with the region he traverses. Aztec, he writes, "is one of sixteen languages, each in turn subdivided into dialects, making up the most important stock of Mexico: the Nahuatlan, which belongs to the Shoshonean group spoken by Indians as far north as Montana and Oregon" (Downing 13). Aztec is the "Mexican language" whereas "fully two million inhabitants of Mexico" do not speak Spanish, "the official language" (Downing 13). Downing works through several complex ideas vis-à-vis Indigenous languages. He draws attention to the split between an "official" language and a dialect. At the time of his writing, Indigenous languages in Mexico were considered dialects. Downing points out (no doubt to those Americans who think Mexicans speak Mexican) that Aztec (Nahuatl) was the language of the Mexicas. This focus on language is important because it attests to a pluri-lingual presence and ethnic diversity at the same time that it shows linguistic "families" that extend far beyond the U.S.-Mexico border where North and South collide. Set within the context of his travels, Downing's narrator listens to the languages around him. Downing undermines Gamio's call to create national cohesion based on a sense of unity across all four categories because it erases difference. In doing so, it erases Indigenous identities (as well as those of other ethnic minorities in Mexico) and their presence in Mexico.

As Downing's narrator moves into his own historical moment, his enthusiasm for Mexico as an Indigenous Mexico grows. For instance, Downing focuses on Cárdenas's indigenista policies in the chapter entitled, "The Return of Quetzalcoatl," meant to symbolize a history of peace as well as scientific and cultural advancements. In this chapter, we see the travel and historical threads coming together. Specifically alluding to Huxley, Downing writes that Huxley went "sour in the Guatemalan jungles," which speaks to Huxley's disdain for Oaxaca and the people there (308). In alluding to Huxley, the narrator remarks on an important difference in their approaches to travel and Mexico. Downing writes: "I have never followed his advice to pull down the shade and read Spinoza" (309). He jokes that all the blinds he has encountered in his travels "[do] not wish to come down" (309). Rather than disengage with the world around him and travel in books, the narrator wants to see and experience the world even on the train. He is busy talking to those around him: the American and the Mexican family with the young son Héctor.

Mr. Downing's discussions with an American traveler bring attention to the intertwined histories of Mexican and U.S. indigenismo. On the train, the narrator listens and talks to the American who will not stop complaining about the trains. The narrator surmises that it is an effort to vilify Cárdenas and the nationalization of the train system. In discussing Cárdenas's tenure, the narrator applauds his efforts to revive the *ejido* system (communal lands), redistribute empty lands for farming, and construct dams (313-18). Informed by the lens of his own moment, he sees "that the great conquest of the Revolution was a return to Indian values, concretely expressed in that pre-Conquest institution, the *ejido*. There is no wall around Mexico, of course, but whatever form its national life ultimately assumes it is going to have its roots in Mexican soil, like corn and the maguey" (319). Max Parra notes that post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism was buttressed by the mythic representation of the Revolution as "a drastic rupture with a past of semi-feudal characteristics" (29).¹⁵ This past refers to the Díaz regime; the reconfigured nation-state worked to define itself against the Mexico under Díaz.

I draw attention to this passage because Downing inherits the idea that the Revolution is an extraordinary break with the past. However, for Downing, this break represents a return to Indigenous values as orienting principles of the political system. Earlier in the text, Downing remarks that the *ejido* system is not "anything peculiarly Mexican" (108). He writes:

In 1492 Amerindian life from Cape Horn to Bering Sea was characterized by communal ownership of real estate, based on the family group. We of the United States need not look outside our own boundaries to see what happened when the indigenous system was disrupted by roughshod conquerors and the foreign principle of individual property imposed. Yet today, when a commissioner of Indian affairs encourages Indian tribes to return to a degree of communal organization, politicians, missionaries and others with axe to grind raise the cry of Russian influence! (109)

Downing observes the overt parallels between progressive nation-state reforms: the expropriation law of 1936 in Mexico and Article 27 of the 1917 Mexican constitution on the one hand and John Collier and the Wheeler-Howard Act (Indian Reorganization Act) of 1934 on the other hand. Both laws of the 1930s worked to collectivize lands and were centerpieces of land and Indian policy reform. Downing sees how factions on both sides of the border who want to enshrine individual property rights challenge these reforms and see them as measures leading to communism rather than capitalism. In this example, we can see how Downing's narrator maintains a North-South gaze attuned to nation-state histories and continued Indigenous presences. His experience as an American Indian grants him

an additional optic to explore Indigenous Mexico. He sees its revolutionary potential to make Indigenous values and peoples central to its nation-state project.

Conclusion

Mr. Downing, Downing's narrator in *The Mexican Earth*, captures the strengths and limitations of a translocal narrator mediating an English-language and Spanish-language archive of Mexican history and travel writing about Mexico. Borrowing the term "translocal" from Álvarez's *translocas*, I draw attention to the extraordinary narrator, an American Indian traveler with extensive knowledge of Mexican literature and literature about Mexico who is keenly interested in Indigenous Mexico. Downing draws upon a bilingual archive to mediate between the tensions that non-Native writers have replicated in their writing on Indigenous Mexico with his firsthand experience of travel and interaction that attest to a continued Indigenous presence. As Downing works through these tensions and historical moments within the limits of his own intellectual formation, he demonstrates an important move to read and travel between North and South. As a translocal narrator, Mr. Downing highlights a messy and engaging process of epistemological and ontological crossings. With the narrator, readers cross the U.S.-Mexico border and begin a journey on the Pan-American highway, a literal and figurative ongoing project to connect the Americas. Along this journey, the narrator produces a history of Mexico that privileges and produces transmotion, a Native storied presence that extends from Mexico's pre-Columbian past into its current moment.

The Mexican Earth could not be more relevant for readers interested in American Indian literature, literatures of the Americas, Latin American studies, border studies, and Indigenous studies. Informed by the travel writing and history writing that he consumed, Downing dismantles notions of race, mestizaje, official memory, and nation-building. He enacts and represents Indigenous connections across nation-state borders at the same time that he sees through U.S. and Mexican indigenista rhetoric- from tourists and anthropologists alike. His literary project compels us to search for nuanced ways to understand the cultural and political relationships between and across tribal-nations, Indigenous and mestizo communities, and settler colonial nation-states. We need to ask not only about how these relationships are theorized, but about also how they are lived and translated. There is no doubt that the U.S. and Mexico had intertwined yet distinct modernization efforts in the 1930s that impinged upon and hinged on the figure of the indio/a. Downing's work brings us closer to understanding the legacy of these histories. His work, in many ways, was *un primer paso* toward a critical-ethical North/South engagement that has longstanding and renewed relevance.

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Notes

¹ I use this term in a metaphorical and literal sense. Downing draws attention to the same doubling. He writes: “literally–Tenochtitlan has kept coming up out of the ground. The National Museum is crammed with its fragments. The digging of a well or a laying of a sewer in Mexico City always resembled the excavation of archeologists” (91).

² Chadwick Allen’s term signifying Indigenous-to-Indigenous connections.

³ “Locas” in Spanish means crazy/mad women. The term takes on additional meaning to refer to lesbians, gays, and transsexuals.

⁴ See Cox, “Mexican Indigenismo, Choctaw Self-Determination, and Todd Downing’s Detective Novels.” Cox also elaborates on this argument in his book *The Red Land to the South*.

⁵ Nixtamal is the “dough” a mixture of corn, lime, and water that is ground in a stone bowl and later cooked.

⁶ Given that Downing refers to the narrator as Mr. Downing twice in the text (274), I use the narrator and Mr. Downing interchangeably but seek to preserve the distinction between the author (Downing) and the narrator whenever possible.

⁷ Huxley travels to the Americas aboard an ocean steam liner and begins his book by humorously attacking the industry’s advertisement strategies.

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, English translations of Spanish-language texts and phrases are my own.

⁹ Official discussions about constructing a Pan-American Highway, or Inter-American Highway, began in the late 1920s (see Rippey). By 1938, 765 miles of the road had been paved, connecting Nuevo Laredo to Mexico City whereas the road south from Mexico City to Guatemala was only partly completed (Kelchner 725).

¹⁰ See for example Tweedie 41, 76, 91, 107.

¹¹ Tweedie traveled throughout Mexico during Porfirio Díaz’s presidency, which she praised highly.

¹² See Downing 132-33.

¹³ See Downing 266-68.

¹⁴ Hochbruck’s bibliography cites Porrúa Hermanos’s 1916 edition as Downing’s likely source text. In my reading, I draw from a translation by Armstrong-Fumero.

¹⁵ “Ruptura drástica con un pasado de características semi-feudales”