



Rebels with a homemade cannon during the Mexican Revolution.

**The Aztec Connection:  
Exploring the Construction of Azuela's Revolutionaries  
in *The Underdogs*  
By Margie McCrary and Michael Myers**

Riding proudly on his horse, Demetrio felt like a new man. His eyes recovered their peculiar metallic brilliance, and the blood flowed, red and warm, through his coppery, pure-blooded Aztec cheeks. (Azuela 72)

In *The Underdogs*, Mariano Azuela presents the story of a Mexican revolutionary figure, Demetrio Macias. The novel itself seems to lack a cohesive plot; however, it provides interesting character sketches of Demetrio and the men with whom he fights in the revolution. As it is a historical fiction, Azuela weaves the actions and adventures of Demetrio and his men into actual events and places in which the revolution took place. Although most of the character development takes place within dialogue, Azuela does offer occasional descriptive passages about his characters, which provide insight into the characters as well as revealing a glimpse of Azuela's own patterns of thought. In one of these passages, Azuela paints Demetrio as a proud "pure-blooded Aztec" (72). Though this descriptive tidbit is mentioned only in passing, the fact that Azuela connects his early representation of the Mexican revolutionary figure to pre-colonial native identity bears interesting implications on the development of this figure within his novel as well its development into a Mexican cultural icon.

In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Albert Memmi paints a picture of colonized people and their predicament, which is applicable to the situation of the oppressed Mexican peasants during the Mexican Revolution. Memmi suggests that the colonized have two options

for overcoming their oppression: assimilating into the culture of the colonizer or revolting against the colonizer. He then shows that, as the colonizer does not accept the attempts at assimilation on the part of the colonized, the only real option for them is revolt. Memmi points out that in revolt, the colonized often reject the influences of their colonizer:

We then witness a reversal of terms. Assimilation being abandoned, the colonized's liberation must be carried out through a recovery of self and autonomous dignity. Attempts at imitating the colonizer required self-denial; the colonizer's rejection is the indispensable prelude to self-discovery. That accusing and annihilating image must be shaken off; oppression must be attacked boldly since it is impossible to go around it. After having been rejected for so long by the colonizer, the day has come when it is the colonized who must refuse the colonizer.

(172)

As Memmi points out, part of the revolt of the colonized is to reject the identity of the colonizer; however, the colonized have often been separated from their own cultural identities during their oppression. This struggle for identity forms a large part of the revolution as a whole as some sort of unified identity is necessary for a group of people to revolt successfully. Because of the need to separate themselves from the identity of the colonizer, the colonized often refers back to a precolonial identity. When examining the postcolonial elements of the Mexican Revolution, one must realize that these precolonial identities will center on the native peoples who were conquered by the Spanish conquistadors, including—but not limited to—the Aztecs.

The postcolonial identity struggle surfaces in *The Underdogs* in the character of Demetrio Macías, who is the main character of the novel. The novel begins with Demetrio leaving his wife and his home, fleeing as a rebel from the federales. The first description of Demetrio, depicts him as what later becomes the stereotypical image of a Mexican revolutionary: “Demetrio buckled his cartridge belt about his waist and

picked up his rifle. He was tall and well built, with a sanguine face and beardless chin; he wore shirt and trousers of white cloth, a broad Mexican hat and leather sandals” (8). We quickly learn that Demetrio is an uneducated peasant who has already become known as a thief before the story begins. He seems devoid of any defined identity, which becomes noticeable when comparing his understanding of the revolution to that of the educated Luis Cervantes, who joins up with Demetrio’s group early in the novel. Luis proves to be an idealist, often spouting the idealistic motivation for the revolution: “The revolution benefits the poor, the ignorant, all those who have been slaves all their lives, all the unhappy people who do not even suspect they are poor because the rich who stand above them, the rich who rule them, change their sweat and blood and tears into gold...” (Azuela 38). While Luis claims to understand the great reason and need for the revolution and claims to support it for these idealistic concerns, Demetrio never offers any motive for his participation in the revolt beyond personal revenge and satisfaction. Demetrio does not adhere to a larger, national identity like Luis does.

In “Opresión e Identidad en *Los De Abajo*” Adolfo M. Franco talks about identity and oppression as they appear within Azuela’s *The Underdogs*. Franco begins by highlighting the need for a unified identity to successfully revolt against oppression:

En una palabra, para que la revolución alcance el fine que la provoca es menester que exista previamente definida la nación como ente sólidamente configurado. Tiene que haber comunidad de ideas, fines, principios, sentimientos. Que se desconozcan o supriman derechos y libertades en un momento dado de la historia, es lo de menos. Más tarde o más temprano el pueblo en armas sabrá componérselas para scudirse el yugo opresor y restablecer el equilibrio. Pero cuando falta la nación como tal, como ente previo a la noción de estado o país, la revolución deviene en anarquía, bandidaje y latrocinio. (63-63)

In this passage, Franco discusses the need for a unified identity for the people of a town or nation to rise up together and fight for a common end goal. He suggests that this is a problem in many postcolonial situations as the balance between the oppressed and oppressor is already upset in that the oppressor has stripped the oppressed of his identity. Franco says that a unified identity among the oppressed is necessary if they are to reestablish the balance of power, shaking off the oppressive yoke of the colonizer. Finally, he mentions that the lack of a unified identity among revolting people will lend to general anarchy, banditry, and larceny. This chaotic prediction best describes the events in *The Underdogs*. As the group of rebels on which the story focuses is led by Demetrio, who lacks an understanding of the greater cause of the revolution, the group falls into petty fighting, looting, and anarchy. With this in mind, Franco pinpoints Demetrio as the representative figure of the postcolonial identity struggle in Mexico:

Combate a gusto en forma animal, primitiva, para dar rienda suelta a los impulsos reprimidos que yacen en lo hondo de su subconsciencia y -lo que es peor- de la subvonsciencia de la raza; sin meta fija, sin conocer exactamente a sus enemigos; sin preguntarse qué es la patria; qué se pretende; cuáles so los objetivos; en qué consiste el Plan de San Luis, porque ni siquiera lo ha oído nombrar. Demetrio Macías no es ni más ni menos -más menos que más- el típico caudillo que ha plagado el proceso postcolonial de la America Latina. (64)

Franco describes Demetrio as fighting like an animal, letting loose his repressed subconscious rage, which perhaps belongs to the oppressed group of people as a whole. This animalistic fighting of Demetrio's, according to Franco, takes place without a fixed aim or goal, without a well defined enemy in mind, and without understanding the identity of the country for which he claims to fight. Demetrio is, in Franco's mind, the typical Mexican leader that has plagued the postcolonial process of Latin American cultures as a whole.

Though the actions of Demetrio suggest an absence of any national identity, Azuela persists in connecting him to the precolonial culture of the Aztecs. This connection is forged by insisting that Demetrio not only has Aztec ancestry, but is himself a full-blooded Aztec: “Riding proudly on his horse, Demetrio felt like a new man. His eyes recovered their peculiar metallic brilliance, and the blood flowed, red and warm, through his coppery, pure-blooded Aztec cheeks” (Azuela 72). The association between the Mexican peasant and the Aztec civilization serves several functions here. One of these functions is that it legitimizes the claim that the peasants have over the land itself. By holding that Demetrio is a pure-blooded Aztec, Azuela shows that he has a right to take up arms against his oppressor who is profiting off of stolen land, land taken from Demetrio’s people. In historical terms, Aztec ancestry was used to legitimize claims on the land.

In *Peasant and Nation: The Makings of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru*, Florencia E. Mallon discusses the long process through which the Indian peasants of Mexico gradually established their independence from their colonizers. She discusses the fact that three substantial battles/wars took place in which the peasants struggled against their oppressive colonizers. These wars included the war for independence in 1882, the Liberal Revolution in 1855, and the Mexican Revolution in 1910 (Mallon 4). She goes on to discuss the phenomenon of the peasants trying to establish their own national identity by connecting themselves to their precolonial ancestors, including the Aztec people. She provides an example of a town of peasants who claimed ownership of the land on which their town was situated and who used their connection to the original Aztec settlers on that land to justify their claim:

The notables then explained, at great length, the genealogy of Tepoztlán’s legitimacy as a village, dating back to precolonial times (“*la gentilidad*”) when it was already part of the Aztec empire (“*basto y antiguo Imperio megicano*”).... The justice of the villagers’ claims is traced to their precolonial identity as part of the

Aztec empire, an identity then recognized and granted full legitimacy by the Spanish crown. (137-138)

With this example, Mallon shows that even in the middle of the nineteenth century, following the Liberal Revolution, the Mexican peasants relied on their precolonial connections to the Aztec people to legitimize their claims on the land.

In *The Underdogs*, the paragraph following Demetrio's description as a pure-blooded Aztec suggests this connection with his claim on the land:

The men threw out their chests as if to breathe the widening horizon, and the immensity of the sky, the blue from the mountains and the fresh air, redolent with the various odors of the sierra. They spurred their horses to a gallop as if in that mad race they laid claims of possession to the earth. What man among them now remembered the stern chief of police, the growling policeman, or the conceited cacique? What man remembered his pitiful hut where he slaved away, always under the eyes of the owner or the ruthless and sullen foreman, always forced to rise before dawn, and to take up his shovel, basket, or goad, wearing himself out to earn a mere pitcher of atole and a handful of beans?

Here Azuela shows the revolutionaries, under the leadership of their pure-blooded Aztec, separating themselves from years of servitude and oppression. He connects this freedom to the earth itself, the land that is free of ownership in a large sense, and suggests that these men, the full-blooded Aztec identity embodied in Demetrio, belong to this land. The freedom these men find in riding over the Mexican landscape distances them from their oppressed identities as colonized beings. They can forget their degrading lives as peasants and find a sense of pride as they gallop across the rightful lands of their ancestors.

In addition to providing a legitimate claim to the land, the connection of Demetrio to pure-blooded Aztec identity serves an attempt at creating a unified national identity from which the oppressed people can draw strength. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon discusses the need for colonized peoples to reconnect to their pre-colonial histories and identities:

I am ready to concede that on the plan of factual being the past existence of an Aztec civilization does not change anything very much in the diet of the Mexican peasant of today. I admit that all the proofs of a wonderful Songhai civilization will not change the fact that today the Songhais are under-fed and illiterate, thrown between sky and water with empty heads and empty eyes. But it has been remarked several times that this passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era finds its legitimate reasons in the anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped. Because they realize they are in danger of losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their people, these men, hot-headed and with anger in their hearts, relentlessly determine to renew contact once more with the oldest and most pre-colonial springs of life of their people. (169)

For Azuela, this pre-colonial identity resides in the ancient Aztec people. By insisting that Demetrio not only came from Aztec heritage but was, in fact, pure-blooded Aztec, Azuela reveals his authorial position as a native intellectual who is displeased with the current, colonized identity of his people and who feels the need to reach back to a time when the natives of his land had a strong identity that had not yet been influenced by the Spanish colonizers. This connection with the Aztecs is obviously more important to the author than it is to the character, for Demetrio never consciously acknowledges his heritage nor seems to draw strength specifically from his Aztec connections.



By connecting Demetrio to a pure-blooded Aztec heritage, Azuela actively participates in the identity struggles common among postcolonial cultures. Demetrio embodies the postcolonial figure, so far separated from his own heritage and identity that he does not even recognize it consciously. Azuela must mention Demetrio's heritage for his readers to know about his Aztec connections. As Demetrio comes to represent the stereotypical image of the Mexican Revolutionary, his Aztec heritage serves as an underlying part of this image. In Demetrio, the Mexican Revolutionary figure comes to represent the oppressed peasant, from a line of colonized Aztec peoples, who returns to a position of strength as he attempts to throw off his oppressor.

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