Indigenous Maya guards and custodians at Chichén Itzá, a premier archaeological heritage site located in Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula, say that nacionales—Mexican nationals—are the most troublesome visitors to the site. In this chapter, I examine the ideological and historical conditions that feed a tension between “Maya” and “Mexican” at this World Heritage Site, finding that neither group holds a premium on claiming the site as theirs, given a long history of transnational and private sector intervention. I suggest that the circumstance of hailing “Mexicans” as disruptive to the archaeological site reveals the national as a marked and troubled—rather than unmarked, stable, or default—category. As nacionales “walk around like they own the place” (according to the charges of Maya site workers), these citizen-visitors perform their relationship with the Mexican state, testing the boundaries of the constitutional guarantees that Chichén Itzá, like all of the archaeological heritage within the national territory, is the patrimony of the nation and, it would seem, of its people. At the same time, as indigenous Maya site workers criticize what they view as the inappropriate behavior of Mexicans, they call into sharp relief the artifice of archaeology’s relationship with nationalism at the site. This chapter demonstrates that these simultaneous assertions and effacements—both of which bypass a firm and proper place of the national at Chichén Itzá—are expressions of what I call a quotidian cosmopolitanism. I find that the quotidian cosmopolitan sensibility at Chichén Itzá is a participatory collaboration between both workers and visitors to the site as they negotiate the meaning and significance of the site in its multiple and often contradictory historical and contemporary social, political, and economic contexts.
In recent years I have spent a great deal of time inside the archaeological zone of Chichén Itzá conducting ethnographic research into the social relations that constitute the history and everyday life of the site (Breglia 2005, 2006). My primary interlocutors have been neither the “experts” on Chichén Itzá (such as archaeologists) nor the site’s most vociferous interpreters (for example, tour guides). Instead, I have spent many a steamy morning and long afternoon with guards and groundskeepers at Chichén Itzá, watching throngs of tourists climb up and down the Pirámide of Kulkulkan (or Castillo), taking tickets and stamping hands at the entrance gates, and even pulling stubborn weeds from between the cracks of ancient hewn stone. The guards are federal employees of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), the state agency responsible for the identification, investigation, and protection of the nation’s archaeological, historic, and artistic heritage. I am still learning about what Chichén Itzá means to them, though the depth and complexity of its significance is obvious as they claim that this archaeological heritage is “in [their] blood.” I have come to understand the bold and perhaps counterintuitive ways in which these site workers define their own stakes in Chichén Itzá. These “heritage workers” don’t confine themselves within the parameters of indigenous identity politics—a discourse that requires these contemporary Maya to align themselves with the ancient Maya, as construed by archaeology. Instead, they position their attitudes, perspectives, and claims within a cosmopolitan discourse on global culture, internationalism, and supranational constructions of rights and duties typically associated with citizenship. This cosmopolitan sensibility among Chichén Itzá’s guards and groundskeepers is—rather than newly formulated alongside the policies and discourse of world heritage—historicized within the archaeological development of the site as an international tourism destination, on the one hand, and a rejection of the limitations of a highly localized identity politics, on the other. What’s more, theirs is a cosmopolitan orientation to Maya, Mexican, and world heritage that profoundly troubles the spatial and ideological hegemony of the Mexican state—the constitutionally mandated patrimonial custodian of all historic, artistic, and archaeological heritage within the nation’s territory.

This latter assertion is unexpectedly crystallized in the guards’ oft-reproduced commentary on the comportment and attitudes of certain
visitors to the site, especially the nacionales. Perhaps feeling a little too at home, Mexican tourists at Chichén Itzá have been known to purposefully ignore the many restrictions on climbing delicate or crumbling structures. Mexicans, the guards charge, boldly enter cordoned-off areas and even engage in flagrant littering. As one frustrated guard put it, “They walk around like they own the place” (alternatively, “They make themselves right at home”). According to the guards, Mexicans display a high (and, it is perceived, unwarranted) degree of entitlement to the site, stepping around protective (however precarious) rail fencing, climbing where prohibitions are clearly posted, and, in perhaps the most notorious case of the past few years, attempting to slide down the balustrade of the pyramid of Kulkulkan. Site workers’ narratives of the behavior of Mexican tourists at Chichén Itzá are intriguing in the ironies, contradictions, and subtextual meanings they mobilize. Indeed, it would seem that as nacionales, as Mexican citizens, they do “own” the patrimonial site. However, as I’ll explore in this piece, the Maya workers feel or exhibit an ownership claim over the site and its symbols. Yet Chichén Itzá—as a site of national patrimony—simultaneously belongs to the whole of the nation.

Troubling the Nation

The charge of “walking around like they own the place” leveled by local Yucatec Maya distinguishes and marks Mexicans from outside of Yucatán as Other. I find this alterizing act a provocative point of entry into the problematic of representing or performing “Mexico” and “Mexicanness” in Chichén Itzá, a site of national patrimony, international tourism, and global heritage. As one might expect, ownership of and custodianship of cultural patrimony are contentious issues not only at Chichén Itzá but at heritage sites across the globe. Increasingly the terms for struggles over the fate of monumental heritage have shifted to the lexicon of neoliberal globalization. Whereas the old-style welfare state carefully guarded archaeological materials as inalienable national patrimony (protected by constitutional mandate in Mexico) for the common good of all citizens (the general assumption made about heritage worldwide according to Hodder’s discussion in his contribution to this volume), the oft-touted decline of the nation-state under conditions of neoliberalization—most significantly, privatization agendas—has, perhaps put cultural patrimony into peril. What’s more,
some evidence suggests that some archaeological heritage was never quite safely sequestered in the commons at all (Breglia 2006).

Thus, my interest in the charge of “walking around like they own the place” leveled by Maya guards against Mexican visitors to Chichén Itzá is multifold. I suggest that in a supposedly unambiguous national space, “Mexicans” can exist as a marked category as opposed to an unmarked or default category among the hundreds of thousands of visitors to Chichén Itzá. Further, it seems that this problematic of Mexico-in-Chichén Itzá or Chichén Itzá-in-Mexico represents a crisis of “nationality,” so to speak, at the intersection of territory and identity. Is this problem emergent with or exacerbated by the intensification of neoliberal agendas threatening national sovereignty over traditional venues of national patrimonial control, such as archaeological heritage sites?

I contend that as Maya workers at Chichén Itzá think and feel beyond the national, the points of reference upon which site meaning is constructed and patrimonial claims are made are neither wholly local nor entirely conjoined with the “internationalization” of Chichén Itzá through the discourse on world heritage and the flow of tourism. I consider that, by calling out “Mexicanness” at the site, Maya heritage workers are actively engaging in a cosmopolitan, postnational politics of location that highlights the tenuousness of the modern apparatus that grafts together archaeology, heritage, tourism, and nationalism, hiding the diverse interests of each in order to create the illusion of a supposedly transparent site of Mexicanness. I use “cosmopolitanism” here not so much to emphasize how workers at Chichén Itzá articulate a specific agenda aimed at an emancipatory political practice. Rather, I am more concerned with using cosmopolitanism to highlight a quotidian sensibility that has percolated within the site and its environs over the course of several decades, the genealogy of which begins to coalesce with the presence of transnational discovery and development ideologies at the beginning of the twentieth century.

There are several ways to approach the multiply-layered problematic of Mexico-in-Chichén Itzá, none more tried and true than the approach that takes as a given baseline unit of analysis a stable and coherent nation-state. Such studies, even as they propose to investigate the foundations of nationalist ideologies and the complicities of archaeology and the scientific and governmentalistic discourse of the patrimonial nation, often solidify rather than destabilize the nation as
an unmarked, hidden in plain sight, category. In this discussion I work the problematic of Mexico-in-Chichén Itzá and Chichén Itzá-in-Mexico by drawing on two decidedly distinct literatures. On the one hand, I look to Yucatec historiography, which allows us to address empirically the issue of the multifaceted “apartness” or disjunction between Yucatán, the Maya, and the Mexican nation-state that social actors ranging from politicians to archaeologists and ethnographers to Maya campesinos have asserted and negotiated for decades. On the other hand, I bring to the problematic of Chichén Itzá a series of compelling (and sometimes confounding) ideas drawn from recent literature on cosmopolitanism. Together, these two strands creatively indicate why it should not be surprising that making space for Mexicans at Chichén Itzá is a tricky task, one that was assumed to have been handily accomplished in Mexico’s twentieth-century nation-building projects but is—in the contemporary moment—undone.

Nationalism Out-of-Joint

Chichén Itzá is Mexico’s third most heavily visited archaeological site and one of only a select few that holds both UNESCO World Heritage status and special status by presidential decree. Known by Europeans since the earliest incursions of the Spanish conquistadors into the Yucatán Peninsula, it began to attract proto-archaeological amateur explorers in the mid-nineteenth century, most notably the English traveler John Lloyd Stephens and his artist companion Frederick Catherwood. The appearance (especially the integrity of many architectural features) of the site today is largely due to the extensive reconstruction efforts carried out by Mexican archaeologists and the Carnegie Institution of Washington beginning in the late 1920s. As Wren and Schmidt (1991) point out, though under almost continuous investigation since the mid-nineteenth century, the archaeological distinctiveness of the site has been poorly understood and thus an issue of much debate. At the core of this debate for the practice of archaeology lay the problem of untangling the hybrid mix of Chichén Itzá’s architectural styles (clearly representing occupations by different cultural groups), clashing archaeological and ethnohistorical records, and what is now a bungled and jumbled stratigraphic record. At stake is determining the critical role of Chichén Itzá in the contact between Maya and others with strong ties to central Mexico and during the Late Classic and Early Postclassic
Periods (AD 968–87). Particularly crucial here became the question of cultural dominance: did the barbarian foreign invaders completely wipe out the culture of the peaceful Maya at Chichén Itzá? (L. Jones 1997; Wren and Schmidt 1991). We’ll return to this debate shortly.

Though the archaeological narrative of Chichén Itzá is compelling, it is fair to say that the site is less significant today for the reliability of its archaeological record than for its popular attractiveness and economic significance for local and regional tourism. Its appeal to the touristic imagination lies in its multiplicity. As with many a heritage site, Chichén Itzá is a space of mixed temporality—what Foucault would call a heterotopia. Not only is Chichén Itzá at once both ancient and modern, both of the past and of the present, but it also evokes a mixed sense of place. It is a dizzying amalgamation of Mexican national territory, pre-Hispanic Maya sovereign space, a workplace, a stop on a whirlwind guided tour, what have you.

Even as a nation aligns (or disciplines) a heritage site into purview, this multiplicity cannot be tamed. For Mexico, Chichén Itzá is both a space of intensification and dilution of the nation, conditioned by both history and the contemporary everyday practices of producing the site for international tourism. When foreign visitors tour Chichén Itzá, it is a perfect, intensely packed synecdoche for “Mexico.” For Mexican nationals, the site extends the reach of what is *nuestro patrimonio* (a term that conveys the sense of “our heritage” in both tangible and intangible aspects) from pre-Hispanic times to the age of digital photos on the top of the Piramide of Kulkulkan. Yet at the same time Chichén Itzá figures, in narratives of both its ancient and modern past, as a disorderly space, a site of invasions, takeovers, simultaneous occupations, and multiple possible interpretations. Thus, as intensely as the site of Chichén Itzá indeed both signifies and stands in for “Mexico,” woven through are a wealth of counternarratives continuously diluting, or de-territorializing, if you like, this seeming univocality. In other words, lots of the rich stuff of everyday life at Chichén Itzá, both historical and contemporary, happens outside of and, in some cases despite, existing within the auspices of “Mexico”—as national custodian, as purveyor of national identity, as staker of national territory, and as embracer of “subnational” indigenous ethnicities.

In part, the dilution of “Mexico” at Chichén Itzá sustains rather than tames a tension between Mexican and Maya at Chichén Itzá. This ten-
sion, with roots traceable to pre-Conquest times, has alternately been exacerbated and quelled by disciplinary analyses of the site. One illustration can be found in UNESCO’s site description for Chichén Itzá, inscribed on the organization’s World Heritage List in 1988.

This sacred site [Chichén Itzá] was one of the greatest Mayan centres of the Yucatán peninsula. Throughout its nearly 1,000-year history, different peoples have left their mark on the city. The Maya, Toltec and Aztec vision of the world and the universe is revealed in their stone monuments and artistic works. The fusion of Mayan construction techniques with new elements from central Mexico make Chichen-Itza one of the most important examples of the Mayan-Toltec civilization in Yucatán.¹

Multiplicity, wrought harmonious by “fusion,” is the neutralized discourse presented by UNESCO. Academic archaeologists and historians, on the other hand, present ancient Chichén Itzá as a Maya space impinged upon by foreigners, or “Mexicans.” For example, Michael Coe, in his primer *The Maya* (2005), describes the Post-Classic Toltec occupation of Chichén Itzá as part of the “Mexican” invasion of the Maya lowlands.² Coe’s (and others’) identification of a pre-Conquest, pre-colonization, and pre-independence (in other words pre-nation) “Mexican” identity works to support and consolidate the Otherness of Mexico at Chichén Itzá and at the same time reveals the historical relations of power in contemporary tensions between Maya and Mexican.

Translated into the popular, touristic imagination, Chichén Itzá is an authentic, richly resonant site of “pure” ancient Maya culture. For the Mexican state, in contrast, Chichén Itzá is a spectacular example of the ancient cultural diversity of the nation. For yet another group of social actors—in this case archaeologists, epigraphers, art historians, museologists, and other specialists—Chichén Itzá is, as UNESCO’s site description notes and quite contrary to the popular or nationalist sentiments, an example of “Mayan-Toltec civilization.” This third iteration comes to UNESCO’s description through an especially thick genealogy crafted within archaeological discourse, at the center of which we find the story of the Toltec conquest or invasion of Chichén Itzá—an event created not in the course of history, but in the course of modern interpretation of Chichén Itzá’s past. This third “expert” interpretation of Chichén Itzá is far from a dry, scientific exposition on the pre-Hispanic goings-on at the site. Instead, Lindsay Jones (1997) finds within
archaeological narrative produced by some of the seminal figures of Maya archaeology (Tozzer, Morley, J. E. S. Thompson, among others) the construction of an ancient drama pitting the civilized (Maya) against the savage (central Mexicans). The meeting of two kinds of Indians—noble savages and bloodthirsty warriors—sets into motion a powerful stereotype with political resonance. According to Jones, “The fascination with the infamous Toltec conquest of the Maya, which seems now not to have been an historical circumstance at all, is actually the manifestation of imaginative (and colonialist) processes that began with the initial encounters between Europeans and Indigenous Americans” (1997: 278). Through the device of polarization, Chichén Itzá is a scene of arrested proto-pre-Conquest invasion. In other words, the site becomes a scene of ancient struggle between native Maya and foreign Mexican invader.

This “Mexicanization of the Maya” narrative seems to be built right into the twentieth-century reconstruction of Chichén Itzá. Thus, the Toltec conquest or invasion of Chichén Itzá and the characterization layered upon and folded within are supposedly neutralized through empirical evidence presented by the site’s architecture—a clear juxtaposition between the “pure Maya” and Mexicanized/Toltec architectural styles in the modern representations of the southern and northern portions of the tourist site, respectively. Castañeda (2000) uses the occasion of reflecting on an aerial photograph of the Temple of the Warriors and the Castillo taken by Charles Lindbergh in 1929 to discuss the ideology of Mexican dominance over the Maya and Yucatán. The story of the ancient roots of Mexican hegemony at Chichén Itzá “no matter how weakly based on evidence, serves too well twentieth century nation building and nationalist ideology” (Castañeda 2000: 47). Certainly, the Toltec “Mexicanization,” if it were to serve any modern agenda would be freely available for mobilization by the Mexican state as “Toltec,” is not an ethnic marker currently in play in the field of Mexican indigenous identity politics. As a noncontested category, it easily slips into “modern Mexican.”

However, the evidence for Chichén Itzá’s two heritages—one Maya and one Mexican—is not only physically manifest in obvious architectural differences that characterize the Maya and Toltec portions of the archaeological site as we know it today. Rather, raced, ethnicized, and gendered differences are woven into the archaeological and historical
narratives that use Chichén Itzá to create an image of both the Maya and the peninsula (their geographical culture area) that feeds the notion that Yucatán is a world apart from Mexico. To what extent, then, is this notion of Maya-Mexican polarity relevant in describing Maya-Mexican discursive tensions performed within the contemporary contours of Chichén Itzá? At the outset of my ethnographic research at archaeological sites and their neighboring communities in Yucatán, I quickly learned that both indigenous Maya and white Yucatecos use the term “Mexican” to distinguish non-Yucatec people or things usually associated with the central Mexican mainland. This distinction is more than a quirk of colloquial nomenclature. The distinction hints at the social, cultural, and geographic disjunctures between the Yucatán Peninsula and (mainland) central Mexico from the time of Spanish conquest and colonization (beginning in 1517) and exacerbated rather than resolved by independence (1821). Thus, over and against the modernist drive to align identity and territory unambiguously, we find that “Mexican” at Chichén Itzá has become a category increasingly “out of joint.” Far from a very recent phenomenon, this disjunction has taken shape by different causes in varying degrees of intensity over the course of more than a century.

While asserting that Mexican is a category out of joint at Chichén Itzá (and before detailing the precise reasons why), it is important to note that it should not be. A preponderance of laws, ideologies, boundaries, and representational practices should guarantee that Chichén Itzá is wholly and securely within “Mexico”: a constitutional guarantee protects all archaeological heritage under the custodianship of the nation. It follows equally that “Mexican” should be an unmarked rather than marked category or identity. Indeed, the contemporary and historical ambiguity and insecurity of these categories and identities stands contrary to the major thrust of the project of Mexican nationalism, which found particularly fertile resources in ancient ruins—not unlike the role of pre-Hispanic ruins in the project of founding Ecuadorian national modernity described by Benavides (in his chapter, this volume).

Throughout the twentieth century, the development of archaeological sites went hand in hand with efforts to develop a national consciousness that would blend and supercede ethnic or subnational difference. The historian Paul Eiss (2004: 125) describes the prevailing attitude among Yucatec officials at the time of the nascent nationalist ideology:
“The diminished conditions of Yucatán’s Indians derived not only from an imputed lack of ‘civilization,’ but also from a continuing process of racial ‘degeneration.’” But, perhaps, one hope for incorporating the Maya into Mexico lay in the fertile possibilities already being mobilized by both foreign and Mexican archaeologists within Yucatán’s rich material cultural heritage. Chichén Itzá, which by the late nineteenth century had already aroused worldwide curiosity of amateur, pseudo-, and proto-scientific ilk over its magnificent ruins, was a perfect meeting ground where the roots of mestizaje could cross-fertilize. Alonso (2004: 467) describes, on the one hand, the European element, a holdover of the científico, Enlightenment rationality that prevailed during the pre-revolutionary dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and, on the other hand, the Indian element, which “grounds the nation’s claim to territory, provides a continuity of blood, and roots the nation’s history in that of ancient, pre-Columbian civilizations whose art and mythology is integral to the ‘national soul.’”

During the reorganization of the Mexican state following the revolution of 1910, concerns for securing both national identity and national property were twin efforts. Not only did the post-revolutionary, reinvented nation secure its geographical territory and its natural resource contents, but the new, modern Mexico wished to pinion down its cultural resources as well. Premier among these were archaeological and historical vestiges. Ruins, facades, and artifacts visible and buried were, along with waters, minerals, and, later, oil deposits, transformed into Mexican national patrimony. Meanwhile, social scientists set to the task of dealing with the nation’s other heritage: its new citizens. Figuring prominently in this history is the anthropologist Manuel Gamio’s “nationalist-indigenist” (Zermeño 2002: 318) project of “Forjando Patria” (1916). Gamio sought to incorporate multiple, diverse, and, for the most part, disenfranchised populations into one nation, a task that as de la Pena (2005: 724) describes, “required careful state-sponsored research to distinguish ‘positive’ from ‘negative’ aspects in vernacular cultures and to find the best strategies for their gradual transformation.” Gamio specifically identified anthropology (including archaeology) as a tool of governance. The otherness of the Maya as an Indian race was particularly acute within the Mexican national landscape, evidenced by Gamio’s belief that the Maya world was a crucial arena for pursuing the ideological work of integration. Castañeda (2003: 244) speculates
that this led Gamio to support the work of the Carnegie Institution of Washington at Chichén Itzá as the CIW, in addition to archaeological excavation and restoration projects, used the site as a home base for multidisciplinary projects including ethnography, linguistics, nutrition, and natural sciences. Though Mexican archaeologists carried out research and reconstruction in the early years at Chichén Itzá as well, all of the bells and whistles are attributed to the Sylvanus G. Morley, the director of the CIW’s Project Chichén Itzá, and his team.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, Chichén Itzá had been Mexicanized twice, once by archaeologists’ imaginings of a pre-Hispanic contaminating conquest on Maya culture seated at Chichén Itzá and once by the modern Mexican state, which sought to pull material culture as well as diverse populations into the nation’s patrimonial fold. What would the place for the Maya be in the now doubly Mexicanized site? In the case of the first Mexicanization, a distinct place for celebrating the artistic genius of the ancient Maya is carved out. Set as it is wholly within the distant past, no address is made in this narrative to contemporary Maya populations. This is not, however, at all what we see in the second case. The modern Mexican state that claimed Chichén Itzá for its national patrimony would eventually need to promote it by celebrating the genius of the ancient Maya while erasing the otherness of the contemporary Maya. In order to create and preserve a Mexican Chichén Itzá, the contemporary descendants of the ancient Maya would need to be effaced.

Yucatán as Apart from Mexico: Historical Narrative

Let us step back again to examine further yet another thread in the deep historical roots of the tension between Maya and Mexican at Chichén Itzá—in other words, let us go back to why Maya site workers are calling fellow citizens “Mexicans” and accusing them of impropriety. Obviously, the archaeological narrative on the “Toltec conquest” by itself cannot explain why these tensions would play out in the everyday practice of operating a premier archaeological tourism destination. The conflict between Maya and Mexican is thus one not only construed by archaeological narrations of ancient invasions, occupations, and proto-Mexican nationality. Indeed, one could argue that pre-Hispanic activities at Chichén Itzá have read the past through the lens of the
region’s decidedly non-ancient political history—in other words, in the region’s modern experiences as part of the Spanish colonial empire in the Americas, and following this period as an ambivalent constituent of independent Mexico. I turn to how Yucatán imagined itself as a geopolitical entity vis-à-vis Mexico after its independence from Spanish colonial rule because these circumstances are critical constituents of the complex genealogy of the problematic of appropriateness of “Mexico” and “Mexicanness” at Chichén Itzá.

Gilbert Joseph (1988: 15), in his comprehensive study of relations between Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, reads the history of the isolation and marginalization of Yucatán from Mexico as first and foremost a problem of geography: separated from central Mexico by mountains and swamps, and served by inadequate sea, rail, and road transportation through the middle of the twentieth century. Moseley and Terry (1980: 1) concur: “Cut off from the rest of Mexico by sea, great distance, and harsh terrain, the peninsula has been a virtual ‘island’ during most of its history. This isolation has given the people a sense of cultural and psychological separatism. They consider their land to be ‘un otro mundo’—a world apart.” Cultural differences—especially those based in pre-Hispanic indigenous heritage—as well as physical obstacles were exacerbated by political ideology from the time of independence through the Mexican Revolution. According to Joseph (1988: 15), “The entire course of Yucatecan history suggests that rather early the federal government resigned itself to the inevitability of Yucatán’s geographical isolation and then formulated political and economic policies that further marginalized the region within the national political structure.” In terms of fiscal policy, Mexico treated Yucatán as more distant, so to speak, than a foreign country (Joseph 1988: 16). Even today, Maya migrant workers are likely to mean mainland Mexico when using the phrase “el otro lado” (the other side)—whereas the same phrase would be used by central Mexicans to refer to the United States.

Given these circumstances of geography and culture, Yucatán has long regarded itself as distinct from the rest of Mexico. Both the region’s indigenous Maya population as well as its white Yucatec elite landowning class have historically resisted integration into the Mexican polity. These resistances have periodically taken place since independence (1821), and include several declared secessions and calls for autonomy.
from the Mexican state. That Yucatán declared independence from Spain separately from Mexico in 1821 was a powerful foreshadowing of the demonstrated “apartness” that the region demonstrated throughout the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth.⁴ Though it is indeed true that “the rise of the modern nation-state and nationalist movements altered the landscape of political identity” (Held 2003: 49), the attempt to suture Yucatán and its populations of white elites and Maya has left an incision as yet unhealed. However, this contentious history of disjuncture between Mexico and Yucatán is seemingly effaced within contemporary Yucatán. But if not effaced, it is carefully and relatively seamlessly glossed over at Chichén Itzá. That anthropologists and historians have described Yucatán, the regional home to Chichén Itzá, as “a world apart” from Mexico is due to cultural as well as political and economic distinctiveness. In sum, these circumstances work in concert to condition the possibility for one group of Mexican citizens, local Maya of Yucatán, to call a group of fellow citizens “Mexicans.”

Excavating a Quotidian Cosmopolitan Sensibility

Chichén Itzá and its practitioners are not cosmopolitan solely by dint of the high degree of transnational flows traversing the site and its history. In other words, cosmopolitan aspects of Chichén Itzá are not limited to the formal global connectedness of this internationally famous archaeological site to either World Heritage or tourism markets. Alongside these extranational conditions is a cosmopolitan sensibility imbued within the site and its environs, which is based not in formal networks (tourism) or designations (World Heritage), but rather in the social relations between and among site workers, local residents, landowners, managers, archaeologists, bureaucrats, tourists, and others. The archaeological heritage at Chichén Itzá is a form of material culture highly resonant within the production and circulation of both local and extra-local meanings, peoples, and things.

My own understanding of the heterogeneity of the local at Chichén Itzá has been developed through long-term ethnographic research within the archaeological site itself, in surrounding communities, and in other regional nodes that serve as points of comparative study. Much of my ethnographic research at Chichén Itzá is focused on
the employees of Mexico’s National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), the federal agency created to carry out the constitutional mandate of protecting the nation’s cultural heritage. These thirty-six workers, many of whom were second- and even third-generation presences in the archaeological zone, are as a group distinct from many other local residents around Chichén Itzá due in large part to their steady, salaried employment, their strong unionization, and their entrepreneurial activities inside the archaeological zone. As to the latter, for decades the oldest generation of INAH workers at Chichén Itzá used their de facto presence within the federal archaeological zone as a means by which to garner exclusive economic benefits through the provision of tourist services. Chichén Itzá’s guards, those who level the charge of “bad behavior” at Mexicans, see the heritage rights of non-Yucatecos and non-Maya as illegitimate while using a particularly clever argument to assert their own patrimonial claims to the site—which is not about cultural affiliation with the ancient Maya, or within a discourse of indigenous identity politics. In my book *Monumental Ambivalence* (2006), I describe how the site’s successive generations of federally employed guards and custodians regard the site as inheritable family patrimony. They claim that caring for the site—literally, their employment in the maintenance and protection of the ruins—as well as the right to benefit from it economically, is “in [their] blood” (Breglia 2005, 2006). Neither being Maya nor being Mexican, in their eyes, makes one a legitimate heir to the patrimony of Chichén Itzá.

Claiming their rights to Chichén Itzá in this fashion troubles an easy understanding of how these Maya cultural workers orient themselves to the site and how they situate themselves within the ever expanding horizons of region, state, nation, and even the world. The apparent deep sense of place that characterizes these workers’ articulations of their own genealogies to the ruins would suggest that the Maya root their identity locally. It would follow from this that any cosmopolitan sensibility would be of Appiah’s (2005) rooted variety. Yet I find a more amenable fit here with notions of cosmopolitanism that don’t depend so strongly on geographical locatedness to secure identity. One of these alternatives is offered by Waldron (1995, 1996), who suggests that cosmopolitan identity is a “melange” of commitments, affiliations, and roles that reflects disparate and disjunctive cultural influences.
Certainly, this would more appropriately describe how contemporary mostly “Maya” employees of a modernized and Mexicanized site of hybrid and contested heritage fashion claims to the patrimony that Chichén Itzá represents.

The confidence to negotiate this “mélange” is very much a part of the workers’ quotidian cosmopolitan sensibility. At Chichén Itzá, the quotidian cosmopolitan sensibility is both local and extra-local, drawn into practice by the site’s Maya workers, among others (tour guides, administrators, and tourists), whose approach to the ruins connects past to present and local to global without either routing or rooting their identity in the national. This is especially evident in how workers claim rights to the site by virtue of a host of characteristics (membership in the local community or inherited job positions working within the archaeological zone) that do not, significantly, include Mexican citizenship. The cosmopolitanism of the Maya heritage workers at Chichén Itzá is a critical stance, an intervention into the state’s attempt to coalesce the territory and identity of the site under the unifying embrace of “Mexico.”

The cosmopolitan sensibility practiced at Chichén Itzá is at once both self-conscious and unwitting. I say unwitting because of the way in which cosmopolitanism becomes a worldview compatible with different styles of making identity claims, on the one hand, and forms of economic exploitation, on the other, both of which introduce the danger of rendering cosmopolitanism compatible with (neo)liberal multiculturalism. As the political and social agenda of multiculturalism has consistently failed to live up to its promises of righting social and economic inequalities, social injustices, and colonial legacies of racism and sexism, it is not so much being “Mexican” as being Maya that becomes the problem at Chichén Itzá that is effaced rather than addressed by the cosmopolitan sensibility.

In other words, not only is “Mexican” a problem at Chichén Itzá, as I have discussed here at length, but so too is “Maya.” Like many similar cases across the colonized world, the “Maya” of Yucatán did not use this label as a marker of self-identity at the time of the Spanish conquest and subsequent colonization. Restall (2004) argues that the imposition of the identity category represents a “Maya ethnogenesis,” instigating a multi-century tug of war of resistance against the imposed ethnic designation. Even today, workers at Chichén Itzá tend to back
away from a strong universal notion of asserting or identifying (with) an authentic Maya identity. People are historically wary of indigenist-inflected discourse due to the legacies of the state-sponsored *indigenismo* ideology turned policy of national racialist integration. In more rural parts of Yucatán such as on the outskirts of Chichén Itzá, residents may perceive “indigenous” as a derogatory category. Many associate the term with the work of the Mexican state agency, the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (IN1), whose rural development mission included cultural and educational campaigns administered from numerous coordinating centers across the country. The critical response from some recipients of the INI’s attentions was their understanding that “indigenous” INI workers really meant “illiterate.”

At Chichén Itzá, nearly a century of cultivating sites of valorization of Maya heritage recuperated a sense of “Maya” that came not necessarily to be wholly tied to “indigenous.” However, in the contemporary arena of heritage politics, there are rather limited parameters on how local communities, especially relatively disempowered subjects, may articulate claims to archaeological sites, monuments, and materials. The spectrum of possible positions is anchored at one end by law and at the other by identity politics. Indigenous identity may be constructed as a legal necessity (such as for Native American tribes recognized by the U.S. government under the repatriation procedures laid out by NAGPRA) or as a political strategy (such as for First Nations peoples of Canada and the Arctic, Aboriginal peoples of Australia, and many fourth world people across the globe). In the first instance, indigenous identity construction must respond explicitly to the demands of the state. The recognition of indigenous claims and any hopes for restitution of material remains of the past is dependent upon an intricate demonstration of cultural affiliation—a proof, if you will, of identity. In Mexico, no law such as NAGPRA exists, and no vocal demand or visible movement for such a law can be discerned in the public arena in Yucatán. In terms of the second instance, “Maya identity” has been fruitfully used as a political strategy in the Maya cultural activism movement in Guatemala and also in the Zapatista movement within Chiapas, Mexico, and beyond. Indeed, to be Maya, or to be called Maya, in Yucatán resounds much differently than in Guatemala and even Chiapas, so close yet a world away from Yucatán. Maya intellectuals and those who stand on their side have vociferously called for increased
access to and recognition regarding Maya cultural heritage sites, becoming highly critical of the work of archaeology in the process.

Neither identity-based political activism nor state-sponsored legal protection find fertile ground in contemporary Chichén Itzá. Both of these options would require the following two conditions: (1) that “indigenous” and “Maya” be rejoined NAGPRA-style in a legal cultural affiliation between the contemporary population and the ancient Maya; and (2) that the state be welcomed as the ultimate mediator or arbiter of identity, conceding once and for all that Chichén Itzá had indeed been Mexicanized. The quotidian cosmopolitanism sensibility demonstrated by workers at Chichén Itzá is not necessarily a politically instrumentalized orientation to the world that seeks to address universal human rights, freedom, and justice in the world. Instead, it is a methodological cosmopolitanism engaged in by everyday users of the site. This cosmopolitan sensibility is one that allows for multiple meanings. Rooted in the anxiety and indeed the insecurity of Mexico, the national does not sit conveniently and comfortably in a safe and guaranteed niche between the local and the global. This notion of national cultural patrimony manifest most boldly in archaeological ruins seeks to trap Maya in a carefully prescriptive identity politics making Chichén Itzá “theirs” primarily by virtue of Mexican citizenship.

Cosmopolitan Territory: Toward a Postnational Space

I centered this discussion upon a deceptively simple question: Is there a place for Mexico at Chichén Itzá? A look at the formal apparatus that governs the geographical and legal terrain of Chichén Itzá (both the physical location along with the laws, policies, and administrative procedures that govern, produce, and reproduce the site) would assume and dictate the unassailable “Mexicanness” of Chichén Itzá. Indeed, all archaeological sites in Mexico are constitutionally claimed and protected as property of the nation. Yet ruins are sites of competing and often contradictory claims of ownership, custodianship, and heritage (Breglia 2006). Perhaps the contestation of ruins is more obvious at Chichén Itzá, a site that has experienced the interventions of archaeology, tourism development, and those of the Mexican state for nearly a century. At the same time, it has experienced the very local patrimonial claims articulated by Chichén Itzá’s neighboring indigenous
Maya residents based on a sort of kinship tie to the site, not in terms of a cultural affiliation, but based, rather, on the successive generations of family-based excavation and site maintenance labor carried out at Chichén Itzá. Compounding these other-than-national claims is the status of the actual ownership of land upon which the famous monuments of Chichén Itzá sit: it is an astonishing fact that this site is privately owned and has been so for generations. I argue that these factors work in such orchestration as to render “Mexico” only a bit player, so to speak, in this so-called national space. The tension between the local and the global at Chichén Itzá effaces an appropriate space for the nation, thereby promoting a crisis in grounding citizenship vis-à-vis this site of national patrimony.

In heterotopic space such as the Mexican, Maya, and World Heritage site of Chichén Itzá, “national space” is constantly and continuously undergoing deterritorialization. This process effects an anxiety and ambivalence for both Maya and Mexican as a sure ground for displaying and claiming citizenship within this seemingly national space, which is spatially and discursively undermined. The site’s long history of transnational interventions through foreign archaeology, on the one hand, and touristic development, on the other, are two continual tides in the ongoing territorialization of Chichén Itzá. These interventions posit with one hand the appropriate place for Mexico at Chichén Itzá while undermining its signifying power with the other.

This deterritorialization and reterritorialization sleight of hand has been played at Chichén Itzá since the late nineteenth century and continues in various forms through the present time. Notable signposts in the site’s genealogy include the purchase of the site by an American diplomat in 1896 for the purpose of excavating and exploring the ruins. The amateur archaeologist Edward H. Thompson, backed by the U.S. government and with funds from the American Antiquarian Society and Harvard’s Peabody Museum, among others, purchased the land and ruins comprising Chichén Itzá, ushering in more than a century of private ownership of the site and Chichén Itzá’s ruins. The site was subsequently sold off piece by piece to the Yucatec tourism entrepreneur Fernando Barbachano beginning in the 1930s. The site remains in the hands of Barbachano’s descendents and associates (Breglia 2005, 2006).

Another discursive and territorial intervention in Chichén Itzá is the granting of World Heritage status to the site. While World Heritage
does not make world citizens, it does mark territories in particular ways that gesture toward a pedagogy of global responsibility. At Chichén Itzá, World Heritage works subtly rather than overtly. Rather than protocol, World Heritage offers the subtest of suggestions as to how to practice a cosmopolitan sensibility. What World Heritage status does is trouble the hegemony and sovereignty of the nation-state as it simultaneously deterritorializes and reterritorializes any given site of national heritage (Breglia 2005, 2006). Sites are deterritorialized from the boundaries and borders of local, regional, and national meanings (and, in some cases, policies) as they become discursively attached to UNESCO’s World Heritage program. Sites are reterritorialized as they are brought into accordance with UNESCO’s standard of “universal cultural value,” over and above particularities of culture area and national boundaries. National agencies, in turn, appeal to and support abstract notions of “cultural good,” bolstering these with specifically nationalist ideologies. Living communities surrounding or, in many cases, located within archaeological sites negotiate these ideals and mandates according to the dynamics of the everyday life of the archaeological heritage site.

While it could be argued that these stakeholders negotiate contradictory state versus private interests, perhaps this does not adequately characterize the contemporary situation. While the neoliberal state contemplates the relinquishment of territorial control over national properties through privatization, my ethnographic and archival evidence from Chichén Itzá clearly supports the claim that the state has, for at least a century, merely assumed—through its laws, policies, and institutional management—that sites of monumental cultural patrimony were within its firm grasp all along. While a certain kind of security of monumental heritage sites is assumed by the liberal nation-state by dint of the principle of territorial sovereignty (in other words Mexican heritage is safely bundled within Mexican national space), ethnographic and archival evidence strongly suggests that the stability and coherence of this linkage (space [Chichén Itzá] / ideology [patrimony]) is tenuous at best. It is only referred to in its problematization, such as in the spatio-ideological problem of “Mexicans” walking around like they own Chichén Itzá, misbehaving, and in misreading the stability of the nation in this space of a disjunctive “national,” of an anxious “Mexico,” and of acting-out “Mexicans.”
The consideration of the cosmopolitan sensibility at Chichén Itzá that I offer here is (lamentably, in my opinion) more backward- than forward-looking. It now seems that the cosmopolitanism rooted in Chichén Itzá’s ruins that has been emerging over the decades has a circumscribed (limited) political potential whose horizon is presently contracting rather than expanding. In other words, the already existing cosmopolitanism doesn’t change the condition and indeed inequalities of labor regimes, land use, tenure, and ownership, and the exercise of local, indigenous politics at Chichén Itzá. What is more, the proto- and postnational space that is Chichén Itzá cannot resist ongoing waves of territorialization vigorously and repeatedly produced by capitalism in a neoliberal mode.

Given this matrix of competing interests in claiming the archaeological heritage site, it would be impossible for us to conceive of Chichén Itzá as a hegemonic national space and, what is more, assert that Chichén Itzá is an open ground, free and clear for the exercise of national identity. Using a concept borrowed from Jonathan Inda (2000: 86), we might understand Chichén Itzá as a “postnational zone . . . a space continually traversed by transnational flows of peoples and things” and, I might add, continually traversed by competing histories, beliefs, and rhetorics of belonging. The use of the “post” prefix here does not chronologically mark a recent decline or “death” of the nation; rather, “post” signifies the renewal of vigor in our analyses of how “the nation” operates in this geographical, discursive, and imagined site. I would like to suggest here that we understand Chichén Itzá as a postnational space in which “Mexicanness” comes to stand for a critical disjunction between local Maya claims to patrimony, the anxiety of national control over this cultural resource, private sector interventions, and the globalizing discourse of World Heritage.

The quotidian cosmopolitan sensibility at Chichén Itzá, as performed by the various users of the archaeological site, informs and is informed by the larger challenge presenting itself at heritage sites across the globe. Specifically, I am speaking of the ability of the public sector, ranging from local communities to national governments, to maintain a controlling interest in heritage. As we contemplate the place of national patrimony in the globalizing world, we are led to ask: Is
Mexico “losing control,” as Saskia Sassen (1996) would put it, over its national cultural resources? Does the archaeological heritage field give us yet another example of the floundering, shrinking, or weakening of the sovereign nation-state, as many versions of globalization would have us imagine? We might use this case of the deterritorializing nation at Chichén Itzá as part of a broader critical inquiry at the intersection of local and global, taking neither as univocal or stable, to focus on the points of vulnerability in the supposedly stable mediating discourse and structure: the national. While many theories of globalization assume or somehow require the stability of the nation-state as a mediating “space” between the local and the global, thinking through the performance of quotidian cosmopolitanism throws into question not only the veracity but the ideology of this assumption.

One goal of this volume to which I hope this case study contributes is to distinguish the challenge of cosmopolitanism from the political largesse of multiculturalism. Especially instructive toward this end is the inherent refusal on the part of Chichén Itzá’s workers to situate themselves within the limited scope of identity politics. What I have also attempted here in this study of a Mexican national and World Heritage site is a critical intervention into what Beck and Sznaider (2006) call “methodological nationalism.” Translated into my own research, this means seeking to understand how “Mexico” signifies in practices, beliefs, and communities outside of the Mexican national territory. For me, the question has a slight (and ironic) twist: my goal is to understand how “Mexico” has a fragile foothold at an archaeological heritage site that is, rather unambiguously, situated within Mexico’s national territory. More than a philosophical reflection or semiotic analysis, this critical stance vis-à-vis the nation is an expression of cosmopolitanism that can be practiced equally by visitors and the visited in a site of international tourism.

Afterword

A recent trip to Chichén Itzá provided further pause for thought regarding the place of Mexico at the archaeological site. I arrived at 8:30 AM, opening time on a Sunday—the “free entrance day”—as in all of the state’s archaeological zones. But something was different. Already perspiring groups of early arrivals were crowded around the ticket
window that should have been closed, purchasing their entrance tickets before approaching the INAH guards who awaited them at the bank of turnstiles with their stamp-pads and hole punchers in hand. Was Sunday no longer free, I asked myself? Then I noticed a steady trickle of people moving through the last turnstile, this one marked with a sign: Sunday is free for Mexican nationals (with proper identification). Mexicans passed through unencumbered, free to enjoy the heritage site. Perhaps there is, after all, a place for Mexico at Chichén Itzá.

Notes


2 As Lindsay Jones (1997: 288) points out, “The term Mexicanization, when applied to the glamorous confrontational drama between the Toltecs and the Maya at Chichén Itzá, is an obvious and telling misnomer since the Mexica, the preeminent third of the Aztec triple alliance, did not rise to prominence until some three centuries after the presumed Toltec conquest of Yucatán.”

3 Residents of Yucatán are not likely to refer to themselves as “Mexicanos” in cultural terms though they might in political terms. By this I refer to specific references to the rights and duties associated with formal citizenship (“somos Mexicanos” when speaking of voting rights), or when speaking of Mexican citizens in relation to other nations, for example, the plight faced by “us Mexicans” when crossing the border into the United States.

4 Yucatán was briefly independent in 1823 upon the fall of the emperor Agustín Iturbide, and the whole of the peninsula (including the present-day states of Yucatán, Campeche, and Quintana Roo) was declared a state within Mexico in 1824. Opposed to centralist authority emanating from Mexico City, Yucatán’s non-Maya landowners engineered the peninsula’s secession in 1839. The briefly independent Yucatán found its white elite-controlled government severely compromised by a Maya rebellion known as the Caste War. The divided region was defeated by government forces in 1843. Though the Mexican government promised autonomy to the region, Yucatán seceded again in January of 1846 when that promise was broken. During this secession, Yucatán contracted with the then Republic of Texas to provide naval support. Felipe Carillo Puerto’s short-lived Socialist Republic of Yucatán was declared in 1915. The political marginalization of the peninsula was complete when Yucatán lost the territory of Quintana Roo (the location of present-day Cancún) in 1902. This represented a “political defeat for the region as well as a severe economic loss,” and what’s more, “it demonstrated a complete subjugation
of potential regional growth to national interests and priorities” (Joseph 1988: 67).

5 The workers’ position is aligned with what Beck and Sznaider (2006) describe in their use of cosmopolitanism as a critical intervention into “methodological nationalism,” the use of the nation-state as a referential unit of territorial, societal, and cultural space, encompassing practices and processes therein.