

Seen and Heard in Mexico

Children and Revolutionary Cultural Nationalism

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THE MEXICAN EXPERIENCE

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egories. This new sense of membership in a body other than the family or the classroom allowed the youngest generation of revolutionary children to experiment with participation in the civic community.

The Best Maugard Method and the *Pulgarcito* aesthetic had a lasting impact on the visual landscape of Mexican national art in the twentieth century. But not every child who learned to draw the seven motifs and to apply them to local themes in art bought the official art program wholesale. As an adult iconoclastic artist José Luis Cuevas, an outspoken opponent of the muralists' revolutionary social realist style, ranted against the rigidity of art instruction he received as a child in the 1930s. In his "Cactus Curtain" manifesto published in the 1950s, Cuevas berated the art curriculum's narrow emphasis on an "automatic method of drawing, a strict, uniform intensity of line," and the restrictions on idealized, mestizo subject matter. Revolutionary officials appeared so preoccupied with developing a distinctly national style that Mexico remained stagnated as the rest of the international art world progressed.¹⁰⁶ Cuevas's experience demonstrates that even a privileged, white Mexican boy growing up in the capital found the art curriculum to be exclusionist.

CHAPTER THREE

A Community of Invisible Little Friends

Technology and Power in Children's Radio Programs

[We affirm] [t]he exultation of the suggestive themes of machines, blue-collar explosions that shatter the mirrors of subverted days. To live emotionally. To throb with the propeller of time. To march toward the future.

—Second Stridentist Manifesto, Puebla, January 1, 1923

"Troka, powerful Troka!" Anselmo shouts enthusiastically. "Play that extraordinary music again; I want all of my classmates at school to hear it; it is so beautiful! I am sure that they will like it."

—GERMÁN LIST ARZUBIDE, *Troka el Poderoso* (1939)

L egislators passed a law in 1927 that prohibited horse-drawn carts from being driven in Mexico City streets, irrevocably erasing one of the last vestiges of provincial life from the metropolis.¹ Buses and then automobiles rushed in to take their place. Pedestrians accustomed only to sidestepping animal waste in the thoroughfares had to tune their sensibilities—quickly—to the more treacherous hazards posed by the new proximity between man and machine in day-to-day life. But with the advent of the 1930s, scandalized reports of children run over by mechanized transportation began to fade from the city papers' daily headlines. Meanwhile, smokestacks and skyscrapers stretched the city's horizon vertiginously upward. Artists and intellectuals documented the mechanization of their country with mixed evaluations, ranging from skeptical *indigenistas* to the enthusiastic, if utopian, Stridentists (*Estridentistas*). In this burgeoning technological milieu, radio

emerged as a viable tool for communication, entertainment, and, for the rapidly consolidating revolutionary government, politicization and socialization. In particular, the official SEP station XFX developed radio programming designed specifically for children.²

For educational officials, radio posed an important solution to the nagging problem of rural schoolteacher attrition, as it required only the voice of a single teacher before a microphone to reach the ears of thousands of eager learners. The idea to create an educational program specifically for children arose in late 1929 in response to shortages in rural classroom materials and the inability of teachers to cater to the specialized interests of their students. Now, radio hosts boasted, underprivileged parents could no longer justify keeping their children out of public education; they maintained that children's radio programming was comprehensive enough to stand in as a substitute for classroom learning.³ XFX featured three programs specifically for children in the 1930s, each with a slightly different pedagogical goal and intended audience. *Periódico Infantil* sought to extend the universalizing reach of the public school curriculum into the home and community through essay contests, homework assignments, and research projects regularly assigned to listeners in their free time. *Troka el Poderoso* introduced children to the modernizing benefits of new forms of technology through their personification and animation in adventure tales. Finally, *Antena Campesina* directed its moralizing modernization narrative about technology toward rural, indigenous children.

Radio undoubtedly figured as a tool of revolutionary nation building, as scholars have demonstrated. I argue that through radio, and especially the children's broadcasts designed for XFX, children around the country accessed language and technology shared by their unseen peers on opposite reaches of the airwaves. Because the broadcasters encouraged the listeners to respond to what they heard, many children had the unique opportunity to negotiate the terms of their socialization, sometimes testing the elasticity of their expanding social boundaries. The invis-

ible network that radio facilitated began to tie together a generation in previously inconceivable ways, as children wrote in to the radio stations and listened eagerly for their names and others to echo back to them on the magical airwaves through their shiny radio receivers.⁴

Yet a comparative analysis of the content and reception of these three SEP-sponsored children's radio programs also reveals the uneven expectations that government officials had of children from different social groups as they interacted with and consumed an onslaught of new technologies. Parallel to the patterns that emerged in the pages of *Pulgarcito*, as we have seen in the previous chapter, modern urban children enjoyed social capital, access, and ascendency through their interactions with the new technology, while the experiences of their rural and indigenous peers remained much more ambivalent. On the one hand, the stellar rise of radio as a preferred means of communication, education, and entertainment meant that a new cohort emerged for children to interact with outside of the traditional realms of socialization: the home, the school, and the neighborhood. On the other hand, children's aptitude for adaptation to new technology meant that within a short space of time, radio access drove a dramatic wedge between those children incorporated into the nation's modern culture and those left outside of one of the most immediate forms of cultural connection.

The Cultural Impact of Educational Radio in Mexico

The relationship between governments and radio in the twentieth century has both a sunny and a sullied history. The power of radio to cobble together diverse regional and ethnic identities into nationalism echoed around the world when it was first introduced in the 1920s.⁵ In the wrong hands the new medium of radio became a propaganda tool for unsavory political maneuverings around the globe, as it drew the attention of populists of all stripes. Sinister uses of radio as the audio vehicle of totalitarianism and demagoguery can be readily identified, with Hitler's astute application of the technology as the most infa-

mous example. Historians relate the seemingly organic transformation of identity from that of a middle-class, Protestant family to stalwart supporters of Nationalist Socialism through the seemingly innocuous activity of listening to the radio daily over a cup of coffee in the family sitting room.⁶ Radio coincided with the rise of the Soviet Union parallel to its introduction in Mexico. In the wake of a bloody revolution and at the cusp of radical social transformation, Soviets saw radio as one of its most valuable tools for retaining the widespread support for their nascent regime among a vast illiterate populace. Children across the Soviet Union listened with equal attention to programs intended specifically for them (and like Mexican children they flooded the radio stations with letters in response) as to the news broadcasts intended for adults. Wartime broadcasts captivated youngsters just as much as the kiddy programs; children's radio programming in the 1930s and 1940s in the United States was mostly characterized by "blood-and-thunder" serials, full of violent crime that remained embedded in children's heads long after bedtime.⁷

Concerns about the wholesale substitution of radio for live education and entertainment merit mention. Radio is often heard in fragments, with important introductory, synthesizing, or moralizing editorial discussion potentially lost on inattentive listeners (the most publicized case, of course, was Orson Welles's 1938 "War of the Worlds" hoax, resulting in three days of mass hysteria in the United States). In Mexico the advent of radio coincided with the comprehensive, ideologically driven, well-funded overhaul of the educational system, and broadcasting was quickly harnessed as a tool of the revolution. The drawbacks of the medium notwithstanding, the power of radio to reach countless ears simultaneously makes it worthwhile to study the ways it was employed, and received, as part of an official effort to construct a citizenry. Furthermore, radio's unrivaled ability to foster conviviality, both through physical and through virtual community, expands the traditionally limited spaces of social interaction available for the historian of childhood to analyze.

Radio sputtered to life in Mexico as the revolutionary fighting died down. The wireless transmission of sound built upon the telegraph technology that escalated communication among factions in the nation's first modern war. Ideologues, entrepreneurs, and visionaries all scrambled to harness the evangelizing power of the radio. Historians disagree over what qualified as the first radio program broadcast in Mexico, but by some accounts it aired from the capital's Teatro Ideal over a commercial, experimental station on September 27, 1921, and featured a singing eleven-year-old girl.⁸ Though this broadcast was likely intended for a specific theater audience, the few and fortunate households in the immediate vicinity with radio receivers that tuned in to the program welcomed the dulcet sounds of little María de los Ángeles Gómez Camacho into their homes, and radio in Mexico was born.

As early as 1929 the nation boasted seventeen commercial and two educational stations. The SEP launched CYE (eventually XFX) in 1924 with a transmission of President Plutarco Elías Calles's inauguration from the National Stadium.⁹ Among the government and commercial stations that populated the national frequencies in the revolutionary decades, XFX was among the most influential. The station flourished under the directorship of distinguished poet, author, and journalist María Luisa Ross and quickly occupied a central position in the SEP's ambitious rural education program.¹⁰ In its first experimental year on the air, the SEP station broadcast only a little more than a half hour of programming daily; in 1927 it broadcast strategically from 11:00 to 3:00 and from 5:00 to 9:00, capturing mealtime hours at home for the working middle class. By the beginning of the 1930s it ran a full ten hours of programs. By 1945, with television still around the corner, radio was king; music, news, and information from 422 stations wafted invisibly over national soil. Children's programming in commercial radio, primarily the antics and lyrics of Francisco Gabilondo Soler's singing cricket, Cri-Cri, broadcast by superstation XEW—boasted the strongest transmission in the country—from the 1930s until well into the 1960s. If television was the substitute

mother of children growing up in the second half of the twentieth century, then radio was the grandmother that reared the previous generation.¹¹

Given radio's immediate cultural authority, government officials saw both the possibilities and the dangers of corruptibility that the medium afforded. For that reason, almost at its inception, the government moved swiftly to regulate radio content and transmission radius.¹² In a forward-looking move for the educational future of the nation's citizens, the SEP optimistically employed XFX as an agent in its mission to educate Mexicans far removed from the material resources and curricula.

The obvious question of reception complicates a full understanding of the medium. The presence of a radio receiver in one's home does not guarantee that residents listened to it as intended—or at all. Likewise, the absence of a household radio did not prevent someone from hearing a program at a neighbor's house or at the local schoolhouse. Yet some statistics do provide a glimpse of nationwide trends and suggest the reception that centrally produced radio programs could have enjoyed: by 1940 about one urban home in five had a radio, compared to only one in one hundred in the rural districts. Overall, 91.3 percent of the total radios owned nationwide could be found in cities, raising legitimate questions about the universal education of broadcasts to rural communities purported by XFX protagonists.¹³ Nationwide, somewhere between 26,000 and 30,000 radio devices could be found in the country in 1926, leaping to anywhere from 100,000 in 1930 to upwards of 250,000 by 1935. Furthermore, historian Justin Castro notes that simple handmade receivers would have augmented this number.¹⁴ Estimates about the placement of SEP-sponsored radio devices in schools put the total number of apparatuses in the low thousands for the decade 1924–34, peaking in 1930.¹⁵ Historians have noted that interruptions in reception due to frequency problems or electricity inhibited even those SEP radios from having the full intended impact. Nevertheless, the program content—evident from broadcast transcripts and correspondence filtering through the SEP's Office of Cultural Radiotele-

phony (Oficina Cultural Radiotelefónica)—and letters from listeners reveal the tensions and connections between bureaucrats' intentions and individuals' reception as the nation adapted to the integration of a new transmitter of cultural information.

Radio's cultural influence reached wide, even as individual stations' frequencies often flickered in and out. The new medium of radio transformed the social landscape by creating new shared sounds and information.¹⁶ From the late 1920s, radio reporters appeared alongside those from newspapers at public events, sending descriptions of commemorations and discourses into homes and classrooms across the country. The presence of sound originating somewhere outside of the immediate location had a dramatic impact on the heard world of listeners, eavesdroppers, and passersby. The introduction of new sounds and ideas that gained rapid widespread recognition wrought meaningful cultural changes, signaling a shift from locally produced oral and aural culture to privilege centrally produced music, stories, discourses, and audio culture.¹⁷ As a social phenomenon radio offered opportunities for individuals to join their fellow community members, laborers, or drinkers as they gathered around the apparatus to listen to a program, offering moments of shared experiences and fueling conversations long beyond the scope of transmission or hours of broadcast.¹⁸ Commercial radio transmissions disseminated consumer messages about both products and images that became symbols of national identity (beer and mariachi, for example). More aggressively than newspapers and comic books, radio dictated what the members of the *gran familia mexicana*—Mexico's national “family” imagined and touted by members of the official party—ought to consume; whether or not they actually did is another matter.¹⁹

Radio was a marvel of abstraction, anonymously translating terms such as *patria* and *mexicano* to countless individuals offering a shred of material evidence. To bolster nationalist content, XFX officials mandated the live broadcast of civic events such as Independence Day commemorations, presidential inaugurations and speeches, and announcements by the secretary of

education—events previously situated in Mexico City and available to the rest of the nation only through print journalistic accounts.²⁰ Some saw the universalizing potential of radio as a liability; as one *El Universal Ilustrado* contributor listlessly editorialized, “[As a result of radio] there will no longer be sad childhoods. They will be happy ones. . . . Everyone will have the same childhood, or more or less similar ones. A happy-sad childhood.”²¹ Even at its inception, then, radio demonstrated its ability to eradicate social and personal distinctions in a process of national cultural unification. Even as it forged a sense of collective identity among compatriots invisible to each other, radio fostered tangible intimacy, as individuals huddled physically around the substantial bulk of the early radio receivers to hear the latest bulletins and trends together. The high ratio of rural residents to radio receivers, then, may indicate an even tighter unification of community than the statistics suggest. On the other hand, radio also served as a proxy for human interaction, a mechanical intercessor between the government and its citizens, the doctor and his patient, the teacher and her pupil.

Within the national audience, radio had the capability of targeting specialized audiences by creating specific programming—not just for children, as examined here—but also for housewives, farmers, rural schoolteachers, small business owners, and indigenous groups. Certainly, though, the programs did not reach only their intended audience. Children listened in on instructions to their parents on how to properly fertilize a new crop, just as adults hovered around the daily hygiene lesson intended for their children. Evidence of this comes from the June 17, 1930, broadcast of *Periódico Infantil*, in which the announcer addressed his child audience members at the end of a story: “Now we can turn to an educational little discussion. Ah! But first, let me have a quick chat with your mommy. She’s right there by your side, isn’t she? . . . Pleased to meet you, señora, I am Periódico Infantil xfx, at your service. . . . [P]erhaps on occasion you have listened in on my educational chats while taking a rest from your chores.”²² It is worth noting that parental accompaniment during children’s radio hour did not always sig-

nal cross-generational collaboration. When Ana María Saldaña sought her father’s editorial eye after crafting a response to a broadcast competition, he provided verbal confirmation but would not review her letter. She deflected any potential criticism of her submission (in a passive-aggressive tone perhaps intended for her father in case he had a change of heart) by concluding that her father was unwilling to correct her grammar. He would not even let her use his pen, so she had to write in pencil.²³ Even as radio carved out distinct social and cultural groups through its programming, its boundless nature more democratically promoted cross-generational communication and even united children’s culture with that of adults in the mainstream.

Programs designed by government-sponsored radio can be seen as part of a trio of campaigns, along with pediatric medicine and socialist pedagogy, that enabled government officials to join parents—and specifically mothers—and exercise moral authority in raising children. The chorus of adult voices in children’s lives expanded in the 1920s and 1930s to include those that the speakers issued forth, an intellectual authority physically embodied by the radio apparatus. Furthermore, specialized programs designed for women and mothers reinforced the dynamic of the new Revolutionary Family. A 1933 program, *Bringing Together the Home and the School* (*Boletín para el Aceramiento entre el Hogar y la Escuela*), reminded adult listeners that every activity in which children engaged had tremendous bearing on their development. The announcer cautioned mothers to be particularly vigilant to ensure continuity between education in the classroom and in the home. One bulletin announced unequivocally that the educational program had achieved perfection, a declaration that insinuated that mothers could corrupt this project through negligence. Instead of occupying children in mundane daily household chores—or worse, leaving their free time to their own devices—such radio bulletins encouraged mothers to engage children in productive, educational activities that would hone their proletarian sensibilities. Radio announcers suggested the restoration of old fur-

niture, toy making, building collections, and the preparation of demonstrations of teacher appreciation as appropriate leisure activities for children under parental direction on weekends and afternoons.²⁴

Early radio advocates adjoined to middle-class consumers that mothers would rejoice at the family unification that radio wrought; compelling programs meant that fathers would stay at home to tune in and that children would resist the draw of the street in favor of the family parlor.²⁵ Certain XFX programs further reinforced the authority of the feminine, domestic sphere. The host of *The Family Doctor* (*Médico Familiar*), with his amenable voice, informed housewives about domestic hygiene and child care through dramatized home visits across the republic and his kindly although paternalistic answers to questions asked by listeners through the mail or telephone. *The Family Doctor* had a segment in which the host addressed the children directly, instructing them on their own health, subtly bypassing the mother's omniscience about all things related to her offspring.²⁶ The SEP, using the radio, thus entered the domestic sphere, to uphold women's authority as mothers. Even as radio officials educated mothers, they focused the nation's collective attention on that most important purveyor of the revolution's future: the child. The voices emanating from the radio represented additional adult authority figures to the pantheon of adults in children's lives. Yet far from representing yet another set of adult-implemented constraints on children's actions and decisions, the present analysis of children's interactions with radio programs demonstrates that child listeners chose from among the variety of adult influences in their lives and assigned authority to the voices that appeared most relevant to the circumstances or activities at hand.

In order to expand the audience, in 1932 different branches of the Ministry of Public Education delivered seventy-five radio receivers to rural areas within the broadcast range of the station. Public education minister Narciso Bassols used this audience as a laboratory for the future expansion of radio education programs.²⁷ The SEP manufactured "Titlanti" brand equipment at

the cost of thirty-six pesos each, approximately covering the cost of manufacturing, as part of a burgeoning economic nationalist plan to offset the flow of American-made imports.²⁸ Delivery service included technical information on how to operate the receivers, and the arrival of the receiver resulted in celebrations within the communities. Photographers accompanied the SEP representatives on their arduous journeys on horseback to remote villages to deposit radio equipment, documenting the arrival of the conspicuously modern apparatus placed incongruously in thatched schoolhouses and surrounded by proud barefoot farmers. The arrival of a radio marked a momentous day, as villagers solemnly posed bedecked in their cleanest white clothes alongside the machine, and the presence of a tuba and a drum in one photo showed that the SEP officials rode into town with much fanfare. The officials left the radios in the care of the rural schoolteachers, with painstaking instructions about adhering to the SEP transmission schedule, the logistics of operating the machinery, and recommendations for gathering villagers at appointed times to take advantage of this new educational tool. Once the apparatus of officially produced knowledge had been passed to the schoolteachers, government officials returned only sporadically to inspect the machines for proper usage and upkeep.

The transmission of revolutionary education faced many challenges at its inception. Evidently, radio did not meld seamlessly into the countryside. In the early years, with unreliable batteries and rural electricity that worked in fits and starts, even the successful delivery of a radio did not ensure effective reception. Although the SEP strategically scheduled daily radio programming, many times groups would gather in the school to no avail as the faulty electric current or the weak signal from Mexico City foiled the pedagogical transmission. One inspector visited ten schools in the state of México and reported that he found one radio had a blown fuse, one was broken entirely, one school had no electricity, four schools had not paid the electric bill, and the rest simply were not taking advantage of the educational service for various reasons. Of the ten villagers used only three of the radios as intended by the SEP. None

of the villagers reported knowledge of the hours of shows specifically designed for campesinos, teachers, and children. One teacher commented that the schedule did not reflect the realities of village life; a program for campesinos began at six in the evening, but most labored in the fields until at least eight at night.²⁹ The teacher in charge of each radio received a chart on which to document its condition, the number of hours it was connected to electricity, the times when the signal came through the clearest, the programs that garnered the most interest among villagers, and the average attendance at each program. As evidence that officials wanted to tailor this medium to best fit the seasonal needs of the community, the final section on the questionnaire asked the teacher to note the main crops and climate characteristic of the zone.³⁰

Furthermore, the SEP faced competition from other government agencies and commercial radio stations that vied for listeners' precious free time. The consolidation of the official political party, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR), in 1929 corresponded with increasingly political content diffused through government agencies' radio stations. Educational officials saw radio as an educational blessing but also as a potential curse and in 1933 expressed the hope that XFX through its socialist orientation would combat the antirevolutionary views being propagated by other radio stations.³¹ Hoping to corner the market, the SEP delivered radios with the dial fixed to XFX; it did not take long for villagers to break the sealed dial and listen to other stations. SEP radio inspectors visiting several schools in Tlaxcala reported that, despite their precautions, many of the school radio settings had been changed, and villagers could listen to something other than the educational programs emanating from Mexico City. Nearby Puebla represented the greatest competition over the airwaves in this tiny state. Oftentimes, villagers would gather to listen to an appointed SEP broadcast but found the station from Puebla to be clearer—and more entertaining (it proved nearly impossible to pass up a concert by Agustín Lara in favor of an instructional bulletin about proper hand-washing methods). The teachers entrusted with the SEP's

mission often participated in tuning the radio to entertainment programs. In many cases, the schoolteachers lived not in the villages but in Mexico City and reported to their schools sporadically, so community members could tinker with the radio.³²

SEP officials had reason to be concerned about ideological corruption from competing radio stations. One January day in 1935, station XXX, sponsored by conservative daily newspaper *La Prensa*, broadcast the Three Wise Men, who took the microphone to address all children within earshot. They wanted as many children as possible to know they were upset. In stern voices, Melchor, Gaspar, and Baltasar related disappointment over their waning reception by the country's youth on a recent Three Kings' Day. Their annual journey to deliver toys had become increasingly more arduous and dangerous; no longer did children greet them with affection and joy. Instead, children were donning "colored shirts"—a reference to the militarization of children by various political parties, such as the red shirts of the Communist Youth—and picking up weapons instead of toys. The Three Wise Men, now old and tired, lamented the loss of childhood through the politicization of youth.³³ The XXX missive was a response to the anticlerical, secular turn taken by the revolution. In a climate in which the radical Cristero responses to the anticlerical turn sustained by the government (and educational curriculum) of Lázaro Cárdenas still simmered, SEP officials clearly wanted to avoid spreading antirevolutionary propaganda such as this over machines that they worked so hard to install in rural areas.

Despite the initial frustrations of introducing a new technology to the rural population, the persistence of the SEP inspectors and the apparent willingness of the government agency to adapt to initial difficulties eventually yielded a culture in which radio became the predominant source of information, education, and entertainment. In this context XFX implemented the children's radio "magazine" *Periódico Infantil*, hoping to consolidate a uniform base of practical skills, literacy, and technological knowledge across its young audience. Regardless of the concerted effort to conduct the educational campaign over the

air, children's correspondence with the editors of the *Periódico Infantil* confirms the trend suggested by the challenges noted above, that urban middle-class children constituted the majority of its audience in the 1930s.

A Radio Magazine for Young Technophiles: *Periódico Infantil*

"This is our homework for today's contest," the radio announcer for the Ministry of Public Education's XFX program *Periódico Infantil* instructed his young audience. "Did you listen carefully, my invisible little friend? Go ahead, grab a pencil and paper and tell me everything, but in writing."³⁴ Assuming their obedient attention, the announcer went on to applaud the enthusiasm that children had demonstrated in their written answers to questions about short stories broadcast on the program and proceeded to describe the next challenge: an essay contest about the legendary young independence-era hero El Niño Pípila. The escalated task matched the lofty award. The two winning essayists would enjoy the distinctive honor of hearing their stories piped into their homes, schools, or community centers—and bask in the knowledge that unseen children across the nation would be simultaneously doing the same. The subject matter and format of the contest are rich with symbolism. Despite the distinct possibility that the story of El Niño Pípila was apocryphal, by most accounts this figure—credited with facilitating the destruction of the fortress-like Alhondiga, where Spaniards and royalists holed up during the bloody Hidalgo rebellion—was far from a child. In fact, the Cárdenas-era monument to El Pípila flexes his well-muscled body on a hillside over modern-day Guanajuato in a display of fully blossomed virility. Yet educational officials consciously rescripted the virile war hero as a child, here and elsewhere, to draw children into the official historical narrative.³⁵ The Alhondiga represented a bastion of imperialism, tumbled by the morally superior insurgents, personified by the infantilized Niño Pípila.

Children's programming on the SEP radio station XFX complemented the agency's project to revise history so as to make it more relevant to children and inspire social action. The astute

child contestant, listening to XFX in 1930, may have internalized the underlying message that children wielded the power to enact the revolutionary reforms that would liberate Mexico from imperialist influences and usher in an era of nationalism. Knowing that she was listening and writing alongside a cadre of invisible friends further cemented the young XFX listener's resolve to perform well.

SEP employees of the Department of Primary and Normal Education designed *Periódico Infantil*, an audio children's magazine, to provide radio content that addressed children as a social group with particular interests. *Periódico Infantil* presented simple problems with precise answers and gave clear explanations slowly and with patience, specifically to appeal to young listeners.³⁶ Alejandro Michel, one of the creators of *Periódico Infantil*, claimed the development of this children's program was the first in the world of its kind.³⁷ In its first few years officials delivered sixty radios to the states of México, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Michoacán, Morelos, Puebla, Querétaro, and Tlaxcala. More than half were located in México state.³⁸

Periódico Infantil broadcast twice a day, in the morning and in the afternoon, to form a listening habit based on the pedagogical importance of repetition in children's instruction.³⁹ The regularity of the program reflected educational officials' aspirations for uniformity in public education; children within the scope of the transmission would all be listening to the juvenile gymnastics, spelling quizzes, or story contests at the same moment. The early-morning broadcast took place during school hours so teachers could incorporate it into their lesson plans, causing children to associate the radio with learning. The second broadcast sought a broader audience, including younger children not of school age or those who missed school or did not attend. This schedule, as outlined by educators in the proposal for the *Periódico Infantil*, revealed their assumptions about the audience: to gain optimal results from this programming, young listeners needed to be available twice a day for more than an hour, without any other household or family obligations to distract them from the program.

As could be expected, the plan envisioned by Ross, Michel, and other pedagogues in the radio tower on the Calle del Rélox in downtown Mexico City did not always match the experiences of the intended child audience. Letters from children suggested that many of the classrooms were not equipped with radio or that some teachers did not incorporate *Periódico Infantil* into their curriculum. Student María Cristina Carrillo wrote to the station in 1930 to beg pardon for not being able to respond to the morning program, because she had time to listen only in the afternoon.⁴⁰ The afternoon broadcast assumed the children had access to a radio outside of their classroom (a rare treat for most villagers in 1930); the broadcasters also assumed rural children would have the free time to sit and listen.

Periódico Infantil relied heavily on listener participation; the radio office maintained correspondence with more than a thousand children over the course of its transmission.⁴¹ Show hosts exhorted children diligently to write daily in response to the contests, quizzes, and questionnaires constituting the show. The reams of letters in the Office of Cultural Radiotelephony provide evidence that many children undertook this task with enthusiasm; it resulted in a community of child listeners, most invisible to each other, yet brought together by the shared experience of listening to *Periódico Infantil*. The interactive format also meant that, increasingly, child listeners became creative agents in the content of a cultural form that would be shared with their peers. Children who sent answers to quizzes, homework assignments, and essay contests considered themselves part of the program's creative production force, signing their letters as "collaborators." Yolanda, one reliable collaborator, wrote on the reverse of a prize notification letter she had received in 1929 from the *Periódico Infantil* to prove that she had been a faithful listener for two years.⁴² Radio had become a vehicle for the construction of a social group that had the potential to disregard the social classes, geographic boundaries, and even gendered sectors of childhood. In practice, as we will see, even the seemingly accessible medium of radio did not yield uniform results among its listenership.

The dialectical relationship between *Periódico Infantil* and its listeners resulted in the collaborative construction of a new model of childhood in the modern age. The *Periódico Infantil* broadcasts created an ideal listener and described it to children over the course of more than two years. In turn the program's audience contributed to the construction of this ideal listener through their written collaborations, some of which were broadcast in part and others of which informed the fine-tuning of the program's on-air curriculum. Children's letters offer a glimpse into their everyday lives growing up with radio and relating their daily activities as they revolved around the new presence of radio. The children learned the official standard—promoted over the airwaves—against which they measured their quotidian experiences. Other times they contested this model in subtle ways, asserting themselves as individuals who diverged from the model audience member.

Periódico Infantil instructed its listeners as to what constituted a "niño educado" and provided the signposts to become an educated child, one who brushed his or her teeth every morning, for example (lacking toothpaste, one could use a piece of soft charcoal that could be found beneath the *comal* in every rural household).⁴³ For many children, radio opened a window into the private lives of their invisible peers, and some had the good fortune to be able to modify their own lives to conform to the standards being promoted. In their letters listeners often referred to the gauges by which they now measured their lives: hygiene, education, family life, and listening to the radio. Second grader Conchita Caballero wrote that she listened to the radio every night but expressed insecurity about writing to the program since she did not know all of the answers. She responded to a question about home hygiene, observing that everyone in her family had to wash his or her face and hands (including the kitten) before they could sit down to breakfast. She also offered to send her report card as proof of her diligence in school and offered to bring her drawings directly to the XFX office. She hoped to win a prize for these demonstrations of her hard work. Ten-year-old Gloria Vargas outlined the

activities of her day: in the mornings she washed up, brushed and washed her hair, and went to school; in the afternoons she studied piano and did homework, and then she listened to the radio XFX.¹⁴ Both girls expressed their activities with an enthusiasm that revealed confidence in a positive evaluation of how they conducted their lives by the invisible judges, the XFX educators.

A package of notes written, compiled, and submitted by José Pizá Bueno between August 7 and August 22, 1930, reveals the way that children's radio programming had insinuated itself into his life alongside, and oftentimes supplanting, other common childhood activities. Each note reads like a repetitive diary, a compulsive documentation of his stewardship as a loyal listener for the unseen radio officials whom he imagined would keep track of such things. He listened attentively at first to find out if one of his submissions would be accepted or if his name would be announced as a prizewinner. "I had the pleasure of listening to your transmission last night," read most of the entries, while others wax more sentimental: "As greedy children like sweets, I like to listen to you [*Periódico Infantil*]. I listened last night and I liked your transmission even more than candy" and "With the same enthusiasm as when I go out to play, I sat in front of the radio last night to listen to your transmission." Children's radio programming clearly held a powerful sway over its young listeners, rapidly drawing them into a new cultural ambit that was home based and technology oriented. The swift cultural conversion seemed to be complete by José's last entry: "Last night I stayed in to listen to you rather than go out to play with my friends."¹⁵ Certainly, José was not the only child to stay close to home during *Periódico Infantil*'s broadcast, given the guarantee of entertainment and the tantalizing possibility of public recognition.

It did not take long before several children emerged as minor celebrities among the generation coming to define itself by a set of shared cultural activities through radio, much as we have seen in the virtual social networks and hierarchies that emerged in the publication *Pulgarcito*. Medardo Morales Jr. appeared as an

exceptional member of the *Periódico Infantil* audience, figuring among the most avid participants in the show's two-year call for letters. He wrote copious and unsolicited letters to the station detailing his ambitious program of self-education spurred by the audio magazine's contests and assignments. Not only did he take full advantage of the educational opportunities presented him by the *Periódico Infantil*, but he also became a minor celebrity within his radio listening cohort, as his contributions frequently merited him on-air praise. Medardo entered nearly every contest and punctually submitted the short-term assignments, but he also flooded the editorial office with unsolicited correspondence documenting his educational development.

Not coincidentally, young Medardo's father was the president of the Mexico City chapter of the Sociedad de Padres de Familia "Pro-Infancia," a parents' organization created by the government to offset the considerable political and cultural power of the Catholic National Parents' Union (Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia), one of the most vocal opposition organizations to revolutionary educational reforms.¹⁶ Medardo's prominence in XFX children's programming likely reflected a political decision by SEP officials to manage the image they wanted to promote of the ideal product of secular, state-run education.

Though exceptional, Medardo's documentation of his intellectual escapades illustrates the possibilities that radio helped to open up to young people who enjoyed free time and the economic and moral support of their parents. Perhaps radio also offered a novel platform for those lacking the social skills to interact productively with the flesh-and-blood playmates and siblings who populated their lives off the airwaves. Medardo represented the ideal audience member for *Periódico Infantil*, an intellectually curious child of some means looking for an alternate outlet to report his explorations of the world that expanded beyond the confines of his home and classroom. In some ways it could be argued that children like Medardo inverted the top-down transmission of information by using the XFX editorial staff as his personal sounding board. Assuming a friend and captive audience in *Periódico Infantil*, Medardo could always be

counted on to describe in exhaustive detail educational excursions with his father or grandfather. xfx likely never broadcast these unsolicited reports; they remain in the archives, silent testaments to Medardo's personal evolution, prodded along by radio prompts. A typical letter from Medardo reflected his unusually self-aware and earnest approach: "I promised *Periódico Infantil* that I would persist for the duration of the contest, and even though I am a child, I stand by my word (*tengo palabra*), and I make good on it (*cumplo lo que ofrezco*)."⁴⁷ He proceeded to enumerate, as promised, a comprehensive report of all of the paintings and items he saw in a museum exhibit, including transcriptions of the signs that he observed.

Medardo reported that on Sundays his father often rewarded his good behavior during the week with excursions to the countryside, parks, and gardens in the cities or public institutions such as the military barracks, hospitals, jails, insane asylums, and museums. The trips provided the younger Medardo with life lessons along the way, and he reported his sojourns in his letters, keeping radio officials and listeners alike posted on the progress of his intellectual and moral development. On one occasion Medardo Sr. took his son to the hospital to learn about the evils of syphilis firsthand. He reported with horror that he saw bald soldiers with huge ulcers, with black-spotted blisters, without eyebrows or eyelashes, and with lesions on the mouth and tongue. Not only did these letters reveal Medardo's fastidious personality, but they also offer rare documentation of the daily experiences of an urban child from a family that valued learning and viewed leisure time as an opportunity for education.⁴⁷

In a June 1931 story-writing contest, listeners wrote in with votes for their favorite contribution. In this case Medardo did not walk away with the prize, but the letters from his fans recognized him as a standout participant in the radio show. César Augusto Secaldi wrote that Medardo's story "Jorobadito" earned his vote as the funniest and most original of the submissions and added that this boy always seemed to excel in the competitions. One girl, Yolanda Villarreal, who also voted for Medardo, suggested that his was the only original contribution and that the

other children had plagiarized stories from published books. She stated that one of the stories submitted as "The Seven Princes" appeared in a book she owned under the title "The Glass Mountain." Though strangers to each other, Medardo had earned Yolanda's vote because of his integrity, in her words, and likely also because of his persistent presence on the prize-winning circuit of *Periódico Infantil* rosters.⁴⁸ Medardo came in fourth place with 58 votes (the winner, María de la Luz Amerena, got 248 votes); 737 children voted overall, and prizewinners had to pick up their prizes at the radio station. Whether *Periódico Infantil* officials manipulated Medardo's visibility for political purposes or not, child listeners affirmed his identity as the model participant in the program.

Child listeners got to know each other over the airwaves and occasionally had the chance to meet in person, not unlike the way that the SEP office's drawing sessions in Mexico City forged a tangible community out of its magazine subscribers. The opportunities for physical reunions of *Periódico Infantil* collaborators obviously favored children with means and children from Mexico City (the site of the xfx transmitter), a privilege that was not lost on the young listeners. In August 1930 *Periódico Infantil* sent party invitations through the mail to listeners conscientious enough to write to the station and request their tickets. The party consisted of a meal and prizes for the guests. Concerns that this format benefited only the literate or privileged abounded in children's written responses. Mario Rocha de la Hoz wrote from Coyoacán on behalf of his little brother Luís, who was sick; Mario worried that both his younger brother's age and his infirmity would prevent him from responding in the stipulated fashion and exclude him from the event. Others reported that their siblings did not know how to write but hoped that they could still receive invitations. More letters poured in from disappointed children who had received their invitations too late to attend; dilatory mail service had thwarted their chance to meet their peers. In response, program director José Suárez personally assured each child that there would be another party and that the invitations would arrive in time.⁴⁹

Bringing together children who knew each other only through radio caused anxiety in some young audience members, who feared that stripping away the anonymity of radio would reveal the stark socioeconomic disparity that still marked this generation of revolutionary youth. Gabriel Salazar humbly addressed the organizers of the *Periódico Infantil* party in his capacity as a listener and “collaborator” to the program. “Respectable Sir,” read his letter, pocked with grammatical inconsistencies, “I am a poor boy, and if you think it would be convenient for poor boys like myself to attend the party, then I am inclined to accept the invitation that you sent.”⁵⁰ Gabriel’s marked deference in these few simple lines reveals subservience doubtlessly ingrained upon his family over generations through their interactions with other families of means. Gabriel expressed awareness that he was poor and also that other children attending the party might not be. He wanted to make sure that he would not be an imposter, even though he considered himself a creative contributor to *Periódico Infantil*. Despite the radio program’s attempt to achieve its goal of creating a uniform educational experience for children across the republic, listeners like Gabriel recognized that socioeconomic disparities were far from eradicated by this technological voice of the revolution.

The terms for participation in *Periódico Infantil*—namely, mailing daily responses—placed economic stress on some listeners, and they piped up to let radio officials know. The announcer of the show requested that the children prepare and submit their clean and well-written answers on a daily basis.⁵¹ This program requirement elicited reactions from listeners that revealed the diverse incomes of their families. In one broadcast young listeners were admonished for not writing in consistently with their answers to the questions, contests, and games. Not surprisingly, Medardo spearheaded expressions of concern and explained with cool rationale the economics of his predicament. In the past, he said, he used to mail his answers daily, but he received only a weekly allowance of 20 cents—daily submissions would cost him \$1.62 weekly in postage. He requested that the editors consider accepting packages of answers prepared over the

course of a week. Likewise, María Cristina Carrillo sent a package of her answers to the questions over the course of a few days. She included a note at the bottom that she did not have time to send them daily. In a letter that opened firmly with the question “Who do I believe to be worthy of a prize?” Luis Becerril poignantly expressed to the director his awareness of disparities among his peers. He said that he sent three days of answers at a time and that those who sent their answers every day did so because their families had money. Luis noted that although 6 cents might seem an insignificant amount, on some days his mother just could not spare them. He did not think that this fact made him any less worthy of the prize.⁵² These children stated their poverty unfiltered by a sense of shame, a demonstration, perhaps, of the emerging pedagogical ideology that idealized the proletarian child. Although intended as a nationalizing and unifying tool for the nation’s children, *Periódico Infantil* became a forum for children to publicly acknowledge, and decry, their socioeconomic differences.

There were other ways that *Periódico Infantil* excluded members of its listening audience, however innocuous the program may have appeared. In October 1930 the station sponsored a joint competition with Compañía Comercial “Arva” to encourage young listeners to become as familiar as possible with all aspects of radio’s engineering and transmission. Contestants were to learn and describe in writing exactly how a radio worked to help demystify the way stories, games, and songs magically danced across the airwaves and into their homes. Participants were to go to Arva’s store in Mexico City, observe the radio on display there, and ask questions of the store clerks. Clearly, this competition privileged the urban children who had access to (and permission to use) local transportation in order to conduct this investigation. The Tlaxcalan children, for example, clustered around their community radio in the remote mountains, would have access neither to the department store radio receiver nor the expertise of the salesman to explain its mechanics to them. The radio would remain a mystery to the rural children, a magical box that had been delivered by city folk

on horseback and that transmitted news and sounds emanating from a city they might never visit.

In any case the clerks did not welcome the wave of eager young urban technophiles who flooded their stores in response to the competition. According to an account by the indomitable Medardo, he and a few friends were run out of the store by a surly employee. Discouraged and humiliated, Medardo vowed that he and his friends would not return to ask the rest of their questions, given that Arva employees obviously lacked the goodwill, decency, patience, and care that *Periódico Infantil* had shown them.⁵³ Ana María Saldaña wrote that, although her family had had several models of radios in their home, she never learned how one worked (due to her age, she noted). After asking her father, she was able to name various parts of the radio receiver and how they were related to each other.⁵⁴ *Periódico Infantil* intended the exercise not only to demonstrate the rudimentary mechanical engineering of the radio apparatus but also to bridge a generational gap by encouraging children to interact with adults about the appliance. Clearly, the radio competition sparked enthusiasm about technology in its young listeners, in some cases to the point of exasperation with adults who would not or could not answer their questions. As always, the technological learning curve was considerably steeper for children than for their parents, marking a turning point in which the younger people threaten to make their elders obsolete in a modernizing society.

Periódico Infantil, despite devoted listeners like Medardo and many others, was suspended in 1932. Medardo Sr. proved perhaps as exceptional a parent as his son a radio listener, yet his activities with his son and his participation in the community are indicative of the substantial role radio played for many middle-class families and their children. On March 3, 1931, Medardo Sr. wrote a letter to the SEP on behalf of the Mexico City chapter of the state-sponsored parents' union over which he presided, in which he expressed chagrin at the impending suspension of the program. "Over the past year, we have observed marked advances in the quality of our children's instruction," he

penned, "due to the fact that *Periódico Infantil* . . . has come to fill the void left by classroom education, complementing it with manual classes and encyclopedic knowledge. . . . [W]e plead with you in the most attentive and respectful manner that you not suspend this education for our children, considering that it is of great advantage in the progress of our future citizens."⁵⁵

This did not mark the end of children's programming through the SEP radio station; on the contrary, the show was replaced by the *Hora Infantil* program, which carried on the tradition of encouraging children to participate directly and contribute to the daily broadcasts but was directed by a close group of experts on children to make sure that the show remained didactic and educationally sound. Nevertheless, radio officials' stated goal remained to maintain, at all costs, a close relationship between listeners and program directors.⁵⁶ The *Hora Infantil* program frequently featured guest hosts from kindergartens and elementary school classes around the republic, as they presented songs, games, and stories to their compatriots. One October 26, 1933, broadcast of the program opened with a performance to the flag sung by the Lauro Aguirre Kindergarten, followed by a recitation by kindergartener Dario Urdapilleta. Additional patriotic pieces followed, all performed on-air by the evening's young guests.⁵⁷ This format built upon the tradition, established with *Periódico Infantil*, of privileging children's contributions to on-air production. Now their voices could be heard around the country—literally, not just through a reading of their written submissions. All that remained was to train children across the nation to embrace, and not to fear, the new technologies that would permit this kind of national fellowship to grow and that would usher Mexico into the embrace of modernity.

Radio as Object: Raising a Nation of Young Technophiles

As happens with any technological innovation across cultures and societies, radio captivated the imaginations of the children's lives that it touched. Historians, policy makers, and parents alike have observed children's aptitude for technology, as successive generations approach innovation with intrepid curiosity. Liter-

ary and cultural critic Rubén Gallo analyzed a photograph from the 1920s of a young boy, not older than five years, dialing an early radio, noting that the boy looked like he had become fused with the apparatus, an amalgam of human and machine parts as a metaphor for the revolutionary modern child.⁵⁸ The boy wore a timeless glazed expression on his face, one reproduced millions of times over on the faces of children as they come into contact with the latest technological advances of their society, from weapons to video games. Radio officials in Mexico sought to harness the natural desire of children, like the boy in the photo, to manipulate technology, while they eradicated any animosity toward technology rooted in superstition. This approach resulted in distinct treatment—evident in programming—of urban middle-class children and rural poor children. Radio programming ostensibly intended for all children to join the technological revolution, but not all children enjoyed access to it.

Government radio programs helped to induct children into the burgeoning world of technology that characterized the 1930s. They learned about other forms of electronics and machinery; saving precious time was a value that children could now develop. Revolutionary officials saw technology as an ally in boosting the nation's productivity and bridging the gap between urban and rural society. José Vasconcelos commissioned public murals that demonstrated how tractors and electric mills increased the country's agricultural bounty.⁵⁹ Citing studies of child psychology, SEP officials saw the child as a metaphor for primitive man who demonstrated fear of forces of nature beyond his ability to explain. The simplistic spirits of children and primitive men alike (and, as the discussion of *Antena Campesina* will demonstrate below, SEP officials included contemporary Indians in this category) led them to provide misguided interpretations of inexplicable phenomena. Both children and Indians, then, required directed instruction as to how to harness energy—natural and technological—for the advancement of mankind. Since children viewed both a cloud and a typewriter with the same wonderment, the tabula rasa could be of great advantage to educators who wished to introduce technology.⁶⁰



23. Three Kings' Day ad for department store Puerto de Veracruz, 1926. *El Universal Gráfico*, January 2, 1926. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada.

Different media presented technology differently to urban middle-class and rural poor child audiences. At least through the 1930s the presence of the radio apparatus itself, especially at the technology's inception, clearly marked one's home as middle class.⁶¹ In the commercial sector newspaper advertisements had targeted urban middle-class children as a consumer class since the Porfiriato. By the 1920s print ads presented the radio receiver itself as an essential commodity. Store owners knew that children could tug at their parents' purse strings, so they launched an advertising trend that bypassed adults and appealed directly to children through cartoon-like ads and short catchy exclamations in attention-grabbing fonts. Puerta de Veracruz advertised in the pages of the children's magazine *Aladino*. In one example it featured a line of unaccompanied children—notably all light-skinned and fashionably dressed—streaming toward the doors of the four-story department store, in frantic pursuit of the latest Christmas toys (fig. 23).

RCA ads from the same magazine appealed both to young readers and to their parents that no playroom could be con-

En el cuarto de juego de sus niños, o en su recámara, no debe faltar un Radio pequeño, pero de la gran marca.

RCA VICTOR

Es un profesor a domicilio, que educa a sus niños, los instruye, los divierte, y un curioso amigo que se los retiene en casa y se los arrulla a la hora de dormir.

Con uno de los pequeños radios

RCA VICTOR

Usted estará tranquila porque sus niños no saldrán nunca de su casa.

¡Qué más puede usted pedir!

El dinero gastado en adquirir un

RCA VICTOR

está MIL VECES mejor gastado que en los mejores juguetes.

En la soberbia línea RCA VICTOR encontrará el que usted necesita

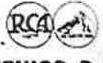
Los hay de 4 y 5 bulbos, a precios sumamente económicos —

Haga la prueba unos días. Pídale en demostración a cualquiera Agencia RCA VICTOR Autorizada



AUTOMOTRIZ DE MEXICO, S. A.

DISTRIBUIDORES RCA VICTOR



MEXICO, D. F.

REFORMA 96



24. RCA ad featuring middle-class children, 1934. *Aladino*, January 1934, n.p. Courtesy of the Hemeroteca Nacional.

sidered complete without a small radio, which would serve as an in-home teacher as well as provide entertainment. The idea was that, with the radio, children would never want to leave the house. In short, the radio assumed the role of both babysitter and playmate (fig. 24).⁶² *Aladino* readers learned to identify with the light-skinned, modernly dressed children in the ads who lounged about among plenty of toys to occupy the time that they were not captivated by the radio. A contest conducted by the magazine established the radio as the most coveted object among less technologically sophisticated drivable toy cars, scooters, bicycles, and toy pistols by offering an RCA radio as first prize, valorizing technology as a desirable commodity.⁶³ A Christmas ad in *Aladino* indicated that the radio could be a child-friendly piece of equipment and suggested that children should have the liberty to choose their own listening schedule by tuning in to the station of their choice.⁶⁴ The next generation of citizens would be well versed in technology indeed if all of the nation's children had access to the shows and the equipment.

Estridentismo for Children: Terror, Technology, and *Troka el Poderoso*

The Industrial Revolution of the previous century had dramatically increased the proximity between man and machine and complicated the relationship between children and technology. Children were at once more vulnerable to the unrelenting dominion of the machine and more deft in their manipulations of it—a characteristic that industrial capitalists eagerly exploited in the years before child labor laws around the world emerged to curb children's presence in factories in the 1920s and 1930s. In the United States the advent of automobiles on New York City streets in the 1920s wrought a flurry of public concern over their encroachment into what had come to be considered "child space." The perceived natural incompatibility between children and technology bore itself out in legal debates and ultimately resulted in the creation of the Playground Association of America and the subsequent retreat of children to protected, domesticated sanctioned spaces free from the dangers of technology.⁶⁵ Likewise, at the same time, in Mexico, stories about vehicular accidents involving children appeared commonly in the printed press. Child deaths involving cars and trolleys created general public fear about machines, to which the government responded with the Campaign for the Safety of the Child (Campaña Pro-Seguridad del Niño).⁶⁶ But the Mexican government also proactively sought the reconciliation of children and technology, foreseeing the benefits of a nation of young technophiles: children's art magazine *Pulgarcito* featured monthly contests for young collaborators to depict the rules of riding the electrified trolleys supplanting horses and bicycles in the capital's public thoroughfares. Prizewinning children drew the trolleys' mechanical parts in remarkable detail; the contest awarded those who elaborated the workings of these engineering wonders for their peers to see. These exercises quite literally drew some children into a positive yet respectful relationship with technology.

Since the country's first strides toward modernization in the Porfiriato, advocates of technology had to combat techno-

phobia that threatened to keep Mexico mired in the past. The advent of the railroad elicited a rash of praise (and critique) from Porfirian writers and artists grappling with the technology's redemptive possibilities and mitigating its perceived dangers.⁶⁷ Architects of the revolution wanted the social benefits of twentieth-century technology and wanted to reduce the dangers associated with its machines. A small sector of the intellectual elite believed that technology would uproot Mexico from its entrenched atavism, provide the impetus for nationalist economic growth, and set the country on equal footing with the rest of the modern world. Artists joined the fray: expatriates Edward Weston and Tina Modotti trained their cameras as tenderly upon toilet bowls and tinfoil as they did on the shiny plaited braid hanging heavily down an indigenous woman's back. Germán List Arzubide was a founding member of the radical technophile avant-garde group that called themselves the Stridentists, and his contributions to children's programming helped to distinguish XFX from other commercial stations. Along with his brother Armando List Arzubide, he worked with XFX in a variety of capacities to render this new technology a useful tool of the revolution. The List Arzubide brothers developed a radio drama that broadcast theatricalized episodes of Mexican history, a cultural labor that gained them distinction as "the constructors of our nationality," by the account of a commentator for *El Maestro Rural*.⁶⁸ Germán in particular earned a reputation both for his ardent defense of the proletariat and for his staunch belief in the transformative power of technology.

Based in Xalapa, Veracruz, the Stridentists burst onto the intellectual scene in 1922 and 1923 with the first and second of four manifestos, in which they vocally advocated for the "unconditional surrender to the miracles of modernization" and the "exaltation of the surging theme of machines, of factory explosions that shatter the mirrors of subverted days."⁶⁹ Over the decade or so that they were influential in the cultural sphere, Stridentists formed what one scholar has called "a movement focused on agitation strategies through its deep

connection to a mechanical aesthetics."⁷⁰ Stridentists saw themselves as expelled violently from the womb of the revolution, and their inheritance was one of cultural cacophony, iconoclasm, and disjunction.

A prolific poet, journalist, and essayist, List Arzubide's literary contributions have been analyzed profoundly by scholars of the avant-garde umbrella and the fragmented movements it nourished. Yet scholars have frequently dismissed the substantial material he produced in collaboration with renowned colleagues in the art and literature worlds as a pastime or an aside to his more serious work. Yet his contributions to children's culture of the 1930s—radio, literature, and puppet shows—constituted the first exposure to multiple forms of media for many Mexican children. Furthermore, the carefully crafted language he incorporated into his children's stories—many of which were broadcast nationally—constitutes a thinly veiled way of reaching an infantilized indigenous or peasant audience that he feared was in danger of missing out on the possibilities of Mexico's modernization.

In 1933 XFX inaugurated a new children's program called *Troka el Poderoso*—Troka the Powerful, or, not quite literally, The Powerful Truck—which aired Sunday mornings at 10:00, in order to reroute children's attentions from fantastic meanderings to practical applications of technology that moved the nation pointedly forward on the path to modernization.⁷¹ Germán List Arzubide himself conceptualized Troka. The titular character was a man-made polymorphous supermachine that embodied trucks, trains, steamships, airplanes, smokestacks, submarines, telescopes, movie projectors—in short, all things mechanical (fig. 25). Troka, probably a Hispanicization of the English word *truck*, had entered common parlance in the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century; it is still used to refer to pickup trucks in parts of Mexico today. Troka embodied the industrious work ethic of all men of all races (in the words of List Arzubide, black men who drained rubber sap from the Amazon, white men who cut lumber in Canada, yellow men who planted rice in China) and was the product of

human toil. He boasted an infallible body made of steel, malleable internal organs made of aluminum, joints made of steel ball bearings, a head made of bronze filled with a brain of electromagnetic wires, and a spirit made of electricity.⁷² Troka took up residence in the radio station and from there transmitted his tales of travel and the transformation of Mexico from a sleepy rural agricultural country to a modern industrial powerhouse. The narration was put to music by legendary composer Silvestre Revueltas—a clashing, cacophonous soundtrack that evoked images of raw mechanical power. The program saw so much success that List Arzubide published a collection of the weekly episodes as an illustrated short story collection in 1939.⁷³ Both the radio program and the illustrated children's book that it spawned reveal the tendencies of Mexico's intellectual elite in the 1930s to value mechanized forms of production over traditional, rustic, or nonmechanized labor.

List Arzubide appealed to children's imaginations by masterfully conjuring up vivid futuristic scenarios that featured machines as protagonists. Through Troka's exploits, List Arzubide described Mexico as a country inevitably moving toward a highly industrialized future and threatened that those outside of the technological revolution would remain confined to a dark and superstitious past. Much like the erasure of the countryside enacted by banishing horse-drawn carts in the city, List Arzubide sought to excise the mystical past from his readers' minds, to replace it with a humanistic faith in the power of technology. At the core of List Arzubide's broadcasts (and texts) are discourses of terror: in his stories children (and infantilized campesinos) vacillate between a superstitious fear of natural forces and an ignorant fear of machines. Somewhat ironically, the anthropomorphic man-made machines that List Arzubide touts as saviors in his humanist national paradigm terrorize, bully, and intimidate to convey their righteous message.

Troka el Poderoso helped to facilitate the entry of radio, and its multitude of electronic contemporaries, into the daily activities of children. Troka undertook a humanist mission to present the new man-made technologies of the twentieth century



25. Troka el Poderoso embodied multiple forms of technology. List Arzubide, *Troka el Poderoso*, 14–15.

to children in a nonthreatening way, facilitating their seamless entry into the modern world. The powerful robot, regardless of the technological manifestation that he embodied, overpowered humans in all of the stories. Producers saw the demonstration of machines' power over nature as a necessary tool for uprooting

the superstitious tendencies held by the backward masses, a flaw that they believed would seriously impede Mexico's entry into a modern global economy. They argued that the folkloric superstitions learned during childhood had left children ambivalent and weak and employed Troka to awaken in them a modern consciousness that embraced technology as the wave of the future.⁷⁴

One tale, "The Second Appearance of Troka," captured the spirit of the *Periódico Infantil*'s assignment, described above, that sent children scurrying to the nearest department store to learn about the inner workings of the radio. In this story Troka manifests himself as a radio tower, and two curious boys, Anselmo and Raymundo, follow his radio voice to visit him at the station. They climb up the metal stairs that constitute his legs, reaching the beacons of his eyes, as bright as the lighthouse of Veracruz that penetrated the deep maritime darkness of the Gulf. In close contact with Troka-as-radio-tower, Anselmo and Raymundo begin to describe his composition relative to other technologies with which they are more familiar: his eyes made of impressive panes of glass must have been melted in massive ovens and forged in colossal molds; his brain of cables and transmitting wires reminds Raymundo of a visit to the telephone company where he watched information be transmitted invisibly over a mass of cords and wires. The boys then enter Troka's body, where cables from far-flung rural areas such as Necaxa, Tepuxtepec, Tepejí, and Lerma converge in the grand central station of information. Troka reminds Anselmo and Raymundo that, although they might not be so amazed by electricity, those living outside the realm of progress rely on candles to illuminate their nights.⁷⁵ Children listening to the program accompanied the boys on their tour of Troka's mechanized body and learned how the radio transmitted the signal into their homes and classrooms. This tale, even transmitted over the airwaves, transformed the magic of radio to a physical scene embodied by human children, a scenario in which imaginative listeners could easily situate themselves. It created a tangible landscape upon which they could envision their invisible community of peers sharing common ground.

Troka sends the fictional boys Anselmo and Raymundo on a romanticized escape from the city as a way to introduce urban children to the countryside, which had untamed features that had to be placed under human control (Troka brags that he commanded the rivers to be obedient to his desires—through hydroelectric energy, irrigation, and potable water). Troka and the two boys take a trip outside of the city, breathing deeply the fresh air and marveling that this afternoon trip would have taken days for the boys' grandfathers to complete, underscoring a reference to the revolutionary road-paving campaign of the 1920s. Nevertheless, they happily return to the city that night and lodge safe and sound in a clean, comfortable, well-lit, and, most important, "hygienic" hotel.⁷⁶ This story celebrates infrastructural development in the countryside as a hallmark of revolutionary modernizing campaigns. It places children at the center as protagonists and situates them as the beneficiaries of the physical changes, wrought by machines at the behest of visionary men, to the national landscape.

In one story Troka paints the tireless and efficient typewriter as the protagonist in a world of cumbersome and page-staining pens. The talking typewriter acknowledges that some of his listeners might be too young to use the typewriter but suggests that one day they seek him out for assistance, to complete their work more quickly.⁷⁷ At the end of the story, Troka encourages children to seek out and gain familiarity with the typewriter. If children had not yet gained exposure to the typewriter by the time they listened to *Troka*, SEP officials used radio to ensure the introduction of the time-saving machine into daily home economics. The radio bulletin *Bringing Together the Home and the School* encouraged mothers to sit their children in front of a typewriter as a way to make school vacations productive, as they could be entertained while learning a life skill. Perhaps more important than the purported physiological benefits of typing (improved vision, eye-hand coordination, and posture), the authors of the radio home bulletin touted the machine as a "symbol of modern progress," and interaction with it would bolster the child's appreciation of a sense of order, cleanliness,

and aesthetic appreciation.⁷⁸ Typewriters, if properly employed, would facilitate the evolution of a generation of bureaucrats—machine-ready perfectionists with an appreciation for orderliness. Such messages, while available to any XFX listener, certainly resonated most with families with middle-class status or aspirations, ones that envisioned desk jobs for their sons and daughters as the ultimate expression of success.

Even as the typewriter seemed to represent the uncompromising standardization of the written form, it allowed for new creative expressions in mechanical form. Much like the radio, a machine intended to contribute to uniformity, the typewriter's freestyle interactions allowed its user to produce unexpected forms. Rubén Gallo has described the playfulness with which early authors experimented with mechanogenics—physical manipulation of typewritten text on the page that abolished the intended intimacy of the printed letter and suggested instead its revolutionary potential.⁷⁹ As if to underscore the individuality that mechanically produced text could represent, when List Arzubide published the broadcast stories of *Troka el Poderoso* in print form in 1939, the opening essay took a mechanogenic form, forcing the reader to break the habit of reading text in linear form. Indeed, the book itself is a work of technology. On the page List Arzubide arranged Troka's words in a schema made possible only by the internal rulers and standardized typeset of the machine. One excerpt, broken up into uneven columns scattered about the page, reads, "Troka is the cinematographer, the spirit of mechanical things, of that which man has invented, has created, with his intelligence, with his effort."⁸⁰ The poem suggests human dominion over technological forces, not the other way around. Its arrangement disrupted the natural flow of the reader, forcing him to engage with the typewriter. Through this and other Troka stories, children learned not to be manipulated by yet another structural force in their lives but rather to exercise personal control over the new, modern machines that populated their lives.

Troka's stories pitted modern (new or improved) technologies against their natural counterparts to prove the efficiency of

adopting modern means of production. The lightbulb rivaled the moon for providing light, the truck rivaled the river for transporting goods, and telegraph poles rivaled trees as perches for birds—even the smoothly hewn posts that appeared to be at rest bore wires gently humming and ticking with information. As a Stridentist, List Arzubide did not shy away from violence and discord as strategies in framing these encounters, notwithstanding his premature audience. Through the allegorical stories, technology and nature become personified, acquire characteristics laden with ideological value, and engage in competitions that often turn violent. Additionally, List Arzubide often framed the promotion of violence and the ability to incite fear as masculine qualities, and the machines carry out their conquests of their feminized natural counterparts.

The imagery was familiar: Diego Rivera's 1926 mural *The Mechanization of the Countryside* shows an indigenous woman representing Mother Nature seated in a field replete with cornstalks, while around her men till and fertilize the fields with tractors and airplanes. A feminized landscape reached its full potential only with the intervention of masculinized technology, and only through a violent modification of her flesh, a gendered encounter so deeply rooted in Mexican soil that Octavio Paz would lament it decades later as one of the foundational flaws of the Mexican national character.⁸¹ The theme resonates time and again in *Troka el Poderoso*. In one story a shiny new male elevator and a sagging old female staircase compete over passengers in a department store. The elevator cheerfully lifts passengers away from the humdrum and exertion of the staircase. Then it hits a snag when a blackout paralyzes the city, but thanks to the hardworking city maintenance crew, the elevator prevails in the end. The staircase slowly gains an understanding of why the elevator sings joyfully on the way up and on the way down. The people come and go effortlessly from his tiny steel cage without fatigue, free of danger, and happy in the knowledge that electric power has saved them time (fig. 26).⁸² Through this short parable, List Arzubide rendered something as commonplace as a staircase cumbersome and therefore obso-

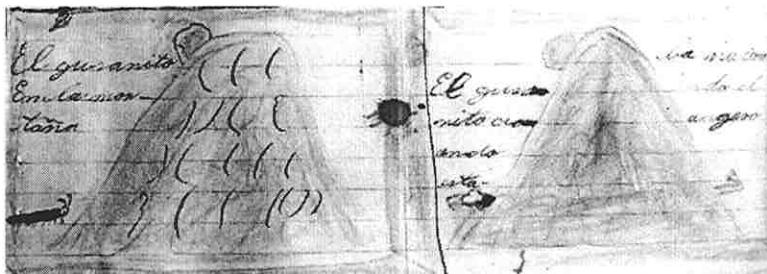


26. The elevator overpowers the staircase. List Arzubide, *Troka el Poderoso*, 69.

lete by being gendered as female and by being placed in opposition to the improved mechanized version, gendered as male.

In perhaps the most violent confrontation between technology and nature, a baby hill and its mother mountain look on as a male train (*el gusano*, or the caterpillar, as the baby hill calls it) approaches, intending to bore its way through the stomach of the mountain to avoid the hassle of having to travel all the way around her. The train barrels forth jeering, "Choo-choo! You can't mess with me! Choo-choo, I'm in a rush! Goodbye, mountain, catch me if you can! Choo-choo!"⁸³ The mother mountain experiences terrible pain at the train's aggressive penetration, graphically underscoring the gendered connotations of man-made technology dominating Mother Nature. Intentionally or not, a dose of valorized male attributes accompanied children's introductions to new technological advances over the radio. This undermined the egalitarianism intended by radio officials in children's programming.

Rare but valuable evidence exists that some of the children internalized the violence of the message. Listeners to Troka on the radio submitted some of their drawings for Troka's (or the radio officials') approval. A set of pictures drawn in 1930 by a young listener clearly depicts the train before and during his penetration of the great mountain, evidence that children heard and absorbed the fearsome message about the power of technology (fig. 27). In this simple drawing, scrawled over with captions that summarize the story, the train physically takes the form of a caterpillar—the only word the baby hill knew to describe an object as foreign as a locomotive. The child listener had taken the metaphor literally. In the second panel, the caterpillar's antennae visibly emerge from the wounded hillside. The artist either had not understood the subtlety of Troka's tale or was so compelled by the animal metaphor as to render the technology lesson futile. Yet unlike the woodcut illustration in the 1939 published story, the child did not personify the mountain with any facial features (fig. 28). The literal, more realistic version drawn by the child suggests a disconnect between List Arzubide's intended message and the young child's recep-



27. Drawings submitted by a Troka listener, ca. 1930. AHSEP, Dirección de Extensión Educativa por Radio, Subserie "Troka el Poderoso," Reportes de la República Mexicana, Caja 9486, Exp. 49, ca. 1930.

tion—a lesson lost somewhere in the airspace between the Mexico City xfx radio tower and the child's living room.

Like the *Periódico Infantil*, this drawing submitted to the xfx radio offices shows that Troka's exploits elicited written responses from his listeners. María Luisa Sáenz, a fourth grade teacher, praised Troka for awakening enthusiasm for science and the arts in the youth. Ms. Sáenz observed that the apathetic children of yesterday had become active and studious today, thanks to Troka's encouragement.⁸⁴ On several occasions Troka asked listeners to send drawings of the technology that they observed in their world. SEP radio officials saw drawing as the best pedagogical way to engage students in the mechanical worlds that Troka described.⁸⁵ And once again the format of this brand of interactive learning piqued some children's awareness that they were not on equal socioeconomic footing with their invisible peers. Listener Agustín Ortiz lamented that he could not draw the airplane or the tractor because he was poor and did not have paper. In the same vein eight-year-old Laura Esther Zapata wrote on behalf of a group of students from San Andrés Atenco in México state that their school and their village were poor, "but we have a desire to study and want to take advantage of what we learn from the schoolteacher[.] [W]e heard some of your stories and today we send you some drawings in hopes that they meet your approval and if we are worthy of a mention [on-air] it would lift our spirits."⁸⁶ Agustín Yáñez, the head of the



28. Illustration from the published version of Troka el Poderoso's story of the train penetrating the mountain. List Arzubide, *Troka el Poderoso*, 43.

SEP Correspondence Office, wrote back to Laura Esther, thanking her for the drawings, and sent with the letter thirty sketch pads to distribute among her classmates. Laura Esther and her classmates directed themselves to a government official within the framework of their poverty and industrious attitude as a way to garner acknowledgment, inclusion, and a reward, however trivial. In this case the children earned what they sought.

The print version of *Troka el Poderoso* contained engraved woodcut lithographs by Julio Prieto that illustrated each of the moralistic tales in stark social realist style, but since it was published nearly a decade after the program's radio broadcast, the drawings supplied by child listeners could only derive from aural inspiration and that of the mind's eye. The images, far from being mere illustrations of a story, provide a glimpse into children's imaginative life as they applied orally transmitted descriptions into artistic application, drawing from the world around them. The drawings also serve as evidence that some children did indeed

listen with attention to the details of the program, providing a rare glimpse into the ephemeral realm of child reception of a cultural phenomenon in the moment that it is transmitted.

Throughout the broadcast and printed version of the Troka stories, List Arzubide espoused a brand of humanism that was deeply rooted in his ideological commitment to the proletariat. He purported to advocate for human dominion over technological forces, not the other way around. He wanted to train his child audience not to be manipulated by yet another structural force in their lives but rather to exercise personal control over the new, modern machines that populated their lives. As clearly stated in his introduction to the text, List Arzubide sought to supplant the superstitious fears about the natural world (the reason for a sudden storm, the mysterious disappearance of the sun every night, the magical germination of plants) with scientific knowledge. The author exploited children's tendencies to ascribe binary positive and negative characteristics to technology and the natural world, respectively. To do so he infused his descriptions of the natural and the technological with value-laden vocabulary: the man-made airplane and elevator "sing joyfully," and the lightbulb "shines splendidly"; meanwhile, the moon "growls" and "screams furiously," marches off violently, pales with anger, and makes a face of profound disgust. Notwithstanding their demonstrated superiority, Troka and his legion of mechanical warriors are undeniably terrifying. They loom and click and glower and threaten their way into children's imaginations. The underlying message of *Troka el Poderoso* promotes an industrialized version of economic nationalism and the subsequent yielding of proletarian labor and its attendant rustic tools to the power of technological force. The resulting narrative manifests itself as a violent assault upon an unprepared rural population and landscape.

Invisible Children: *Antena Campesina*

Like the *Periódico Infantil*, the *Troka* program elicited letters tinged with jealousy from young listeners who saw themselves on the cusp of an exciting new cultural experience but who

felt it just beyond their grasp. When they could they resorted to letters to make their plight known to the radio officials. "I am sending some letters of the lovely stories that you told us," wrote F. de G. Cárdenas Acuña in a scrawling, sloping script. "Are they alright? Mr. Troca [sic]: I would like to see your home like those children who will be visiting you on Sunday. S.S.S. [yours truly]." This child had learned of a group of invited children who would be coming to the station and, summoning all of the formalities in his power, had penned a simple petition. His letter included a rudimentary letterhead including the location and date of his letter, the designated recipient (complete with a title: "Señor Troka el Poderoso"), formal salutations, and an address as a postscript: "I await your orders at Mosquito 232 #1."⁸⁷ In this case the response seemed to be favorable, as the annotation on his letter says to tell him that he could come by the station to pick up his prize. Fortunately for F. de G., he lived in Mexico City and had access to Troka and his headquarters. As radio's scope projected outward, an increasingly rural audience listened to programs generated in the nation's capital with little hope of interacting directly with the men and women who operated the technology.

Citing studies of child psychology, educational officials saw the child as a metaphor for primitive man who demonstrated fear of forces of nature beyond his ability to explain. The simplistic spirits of children and primitive men alike—a category that List Arzubide extended to include contemporary Indians—led them to provide misguided interpretations of inexplicable phenomena. One of the stated goals of radio transmissions directed toward a campesino audience, according to xfx officials, was to vigorously combat the "absurd beliefs" of the rural population in healers, sorceresses, and conmen.⁸⁸ Both children and Indians, then, required directed instruction as to how to harness power—natural and technological—for the advancement of an economically productive nation. By addressing young children, List Arzubide sidestepped a problematic condescension to his indigenous compatriots, but the ample references to children's "primitive" and "magical" minds con-

flate his audience to include any of those outside of the parameters of modernity. A Lockean view of young people as a blank slate could be of great advantage to educators who wished to introduce technology to a broader audience.⁸⁹ In this climate indigenous children received a double measure of condescension from radio officials, in particular through the nature of programming designed specifically for them.

Rural children fortunate enough to have access to radio received a quite different message about technology than their urban compatriots. In fact, SEP radio officials acknowledged the need to modify (or simplify) content for their rural, indigenous audience, whose Spanish vocabulary they claimed was often limited to about a hundred words.⁹⁰ Although ostensibly radio was a universalizing medium—any radio capable of receiving the XFX signal would broadcast identical program content—the intended audiences varied for each program. As established above, there is no way to determine who listened to what program. Yet the transcripts and official correspondence about radio education content reveal that XFX officials saw rural children's relationship to technology quite differently from that of urban middle-class children.

Typical programming for a campesino child—distinct from the above programming intended for children in urban centers—emphasized the physical and natural aspects of their growth and development, rather than activities and skills that would prepare them for city life. XFX designated the 10:00 a.m. slot on Fridays for these broadcasts, programming intended primarily to encourage this demographic group to attend, or continue to attend, the rural schools. Program content included songs, a physical education class, story time, biographies, plant and animal life, rural children's hygiene, and a brief general education segment.⁹¹ References to technology for campesino children focused squarely on the domain of agriculture, in an era when major revolutionary programs redistributed rural lands and restored *ejidos* (communal land).⁹² On occasion, XFX directed radio messages specifically to campesino youth in a broadcast titled *Antena Campesina*. The announcer encouraged them to work with the maestro of

their Escuela Rural to learn the latest agricultural technology that would improve conditions in the countryside.

SEP officials envisioned nationwide broadcasts of their programs, but transmissions still radiated from the nation's cultural and political core. Politics in the 1930s developed along corporatist lines that cemented Mexico City's position as the nucleus of the national political structure.⁹³ Social events for listeners took place in the capital, where the XFX offices were housed, and established a pattern that privileged children from Mexico City over the rest of the nation with more access to cultural programs. Troka sent invitations to children in the capital for parties where listeners of all backgrounds could rub elbows. Because he could not invite the campesino youth, he called them his *amigos invisibles*. Troka reminded his rural listeners how fortunate they were to have access to the "magic box" of radio. They, of course, could listen to their own dear rural schoolteacher, but with radio they could learn from other schoolteachers from the far-away shining city.

Antena Campesina addressed the rural youth in simplified language that contained an abundance of references to nature, such as radio sound that arrived galloping on horses made of wind.⁹⁴ Rural children were not encouraged to run to their local department store to analyze the inner mechanical workings of the radio receiver; rather, *Antena Campesina* still underscored the mysteries of radio technology for its rural audience. This emphasized the sense of magic or spirituality associated with the unseen and unknown that contradicted Troka's expressed desire to eradicate superstition about unexplained forces. SEP radio officials saw radio as the appropriate vehicle for transmitting practical technological information to the countryside, but they did not intend rural children to listen to programs about the scientific progress of the modern generation to which Medardo and his urban middle-class friends belonged.

Conclusions

Educational radio in the 1930s became an important dimension of children's culture, expanding their experiences beyond their

immediate interactions within the family, the classroom, and the city block. Through programs such as *Periódico Infantil* and *Troka el Poderoso*, many children joined a community that officials envisioned as national, although the broadcasting range of most stations clearly limited its scope. Educational officials used children's programming to extend the classroom into the home, reversing efforts to separate the family and educational activities developed at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁹⁵

The Stridentists' faith in the redemptive power of technology informed the SEP officials, who embraced technology and economic modernization in aspects of their curriculum. In particular, the XFX children's program provided the ideal platform for infusing the youngest generations of Mexicans with respect for, and love of, technological possibilities. After all, a child listening to the program over the radio had already taken the first step into the future and was already a young participant in a global modern phenomenon. Radio through daily broadcasts both modeled and served as a portal to new forms of technology rapidly transforming children's environments. Children of means, blessed with free time and resources, were those expected to learn the mechanical workings of the technology that flooded the country in the 1930s; in their adulthood they would be the ones to design, manipulate, and employ these machines as they saw fit for the modernization of the nation. Rural children learned about technology, but the discussion remained enshrouded in mystery and magic, its mechanics explained only in rudimentary terms. The message conveyed through XFX broadcasts indicated that the rural classes ought to possess just enough information about technology to be able to work the land productively. Even as radio facilitated the tightening of an invisible network of little friends through its interactive child programming, some children expressed awareness of their differences as audience members, and still others remained entirely invisible. Their voices did not make it onto the airwaves, their names were not pronounced on the tongues of contest announcers, their letters did not reach the hands of program producers, and their little friends in the cities never knew that they were there, listening silently.

CHAPTER FOUR

Comino vence al Diablo and Other Terrifying Episodes

Teatro Guiñol's Itinerant Puppet Theater

Children's theater will be a powerful medium for propagating doctrine.

—REFUGIO SONI, Mexican delegate to the VII Pan-American Child Congress, 1935

The language is not very appropriate. . . . [T]he boss who commands the *negrito* and Comino with harsh words like "bum," hitting them and threatening them with the figure called the "devil" . . . has left a strong impression on the children. Perhaps the intention is to remove from them the [class-based] fear that has been inculcated in their homes, but for the moment, some of the little ones are frightened [by the puppets].

—GUADALUPE TAVERA, school director, Popotla DF, in a letter to the Children's Theater Department, 1934

Mexican delegates to the VII Pan-American Child Congress felt at home in 1935. As hosts to the hemispheric gathering, they boasted their expertise and innovation in child-centered welfare reform. Featured among the lofty achievements presented to their esteemed colleagues—a newly revised constitutional article making socialist education a national mandate, international renown garnered by the art curriculum, and an unprecedented education budget—delegates boasted about an unlikely tool of the revolution's modernizing auspices: puppets.

The momentum leading up to the transition to the Socialist School had energized the ranks of the SEP. By 1934 the revision