

# Out of the Classroom Maze: Cold War Diplomacy and Intercultural Communication in *El laberinto de la soledad*

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**Abstract:** This article examines Octavio Paz's canonical study of Mexican identity, *El laberinto de la soledad*, against the backdrop of the current political environment in the United States; it interrogates how we can make Paz's rich, ambitious text meaningful for today's undergraduates. How can we teach *El laberinto de la soledad* in a way that advances, rather than impedes, cultural awareness? Ultimately, I elaborate a scholarly and pedagogically valid interpretation of Paz's text that tasks undergraduates to celebrate cultural diversity even while accounting for the text's historical context. Specifically, I propose that it can be compellingly deciphered for students by employing categories of analysis provided by intercultural communication, a field of study which, tellingly, originated during the time when Paz wrote *El laberinto de la soledad* and which is still widely taught in US colleges and universities as a required introductory course meant to equip undergraduate students with the interpersonal skills necessary to live and work in a multicultural society. By employing intercultural communication's conceptual toolkit, as it was developed by Edward T. Hall and Geert Hofstede, I read Paz's interpretation of Mexico as coherent, compelling, and enlightened.

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> To me, the latent, tacit culture was clearly the real one, whereas the manifest culture, like the persona of the Greek actor, was simply a mask, a carved and painted thing, an artifice created to fit a particular culturally defined status or situational behavior.
> —Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (1959)

## Preliminary Thoughts

Undergraduate survey courses in Latin American literature, history, or cultural studies oftentimes include some of the first chapters from Octavio Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad*. The 1950 text, which is a potent mix of philosophical, literary, historical, and psychological ruminations about the Mexican 'character,' seems almost ready-made for any number of classes on Latin America. While the text's prose is plainspoken enough that undergraduates can mull over Paz's analysis of our southern neighbors, it is also sufficiently enigmatic to promote close reading, literary epiphanies, and lively classroom debates.

And yet, teaching the text presents instructors with various pitfalls. First, its canonicity has produced a cornucopia of interpretations that may hinder a clear, gestalt reading suitable for undergraduates (Flores and Caracciolo-Trejo). Second, this same canonicity has engendered a proliferation of websites dedicated to Paz's text, all of which may entice students to forego engaged reading for Internet browsing. Third, students in the United States are susceptible to being perplexed as to the text's genre; besides Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, scant few have tried to explain the United States' collective identity via an 'essay of national interpretation,' a genre more rigorously cultivated in Latin America. Fourth, a reading that merely contextualizes

Paz's text within Mexico's strange political trajectory during the twentieth century may leave students unsatisfied. Of course, students should know that the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (el PRI) forged a formidable cultural apparatus that coincided with Paz's ideas on Mexican machismo and his characterization of Mexicans as inherently given to violence and bacchanalia disquietingly well.[1] Yet explaining to undergraduates—pace Roger Bartra's reading—how Paz's notions of Mexican national character were too readily subsumed by a state power may leave the students feeling removed from the text as they try to balance dates and historical figures instead of deeply reading *El laberinto de la soledad.* Fifth, and most importantly for this essay, are the pedagogical and interpretative missteps that arise when we approach *El laberinto de la soledad* without accounting for the text's inherently dialectical structure. More explicitly stated: while the first half of Paz's book details the symptoms or "necessary appearance" of Mexican national identity, the study's second half recounts the origins of Mexico's outward semblance. Just as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic case studies begin with a patient's vague verbal clues of underlying traumas, and just as Karl Marx's *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* opens with an examination of capitalism's basic element (the commodity form), so does Paz's study of the Mexican character entail an act of unfolding: an etiology of a nation's illness cannot be realized without a preliminary inspection of a particular malaise's more apparent effects. Finally, and as proven elsewhere, Paz's reading does not *prescribe* behavior but rather *describes* Mexican society's appearance (Cypess 19; Quiroga 71).

These hermeneutical trapdoors are even more treacherous in our current political climate. The 2016 Presidential Election stirred up the baser impulses of everyday Americans; twisted notions regarding a supposed need for a racially and linguistically homogeneous United States have renewed talk of borders. In the coming decades, as the United States becomes increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity and language, how we teach *El laberinto de soledad* will inevitably continue to be a precarious affair. Amid such conditions, Paz's text could be (incorrectly) read as supporting a vision of Mexicans as innately violent, sexually charged, revelry seeking and, in short, dangerous (Cypess 36). To those undergraduates uninitiated in dialectical thought, Paz's interpretation of the Mexican character runs the risk of being read as facile, ahistorical, even stereotypical. How can we make meaningful Paz's rich, ambitious text for undergraduates in today's politically charged environment? How can Paz's text become even more salient vis-a-vis the demographic shifts in the United States? Given our increasingly diverse undergraduate population, how can we teach *El laberinto de la soledad* in a way that advances—rather than impedes—cultural awareness? Finally, how can we situate the text within the historical milieu in which it was crafted, as well as alongside its author's biography? As a preliminary consideration, I suggest that we should remember that Octavio Paz was not just a poet, but also a diplomat concerned with understanding, accounting for, and communicating among individuals belonging to diverse cultural backgrounds during the Cold War.

With what follows here, I shall elaborate a scholarly and pedagogically valid interpretation of Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad* that tasks undergraduates to celebrate cultural diversity even while accounting for the text's historical context. I propose that it can be compellingly deciphered for students by employing categories of analysis provided by intercultural communication—a field of study, which, tellingly, originated during the time when Paz wrote *El laberinto de la soledad* and which is still widely taught in American colleges and universities as a required introductory course meant to equip undergraduate students with the interpersonal skills necessary to live and work in a multicultural society.[2] Specifically, these courses give students a forum in which to discuss cultural differences and stereotypes, as well as presenting them with a repertoire of practical conceptual tools meant to diminish crosscultural anxiety and conflict.[3] Paz, the diplomat, was inevitably thinking through many of these issues when he wrote *El laberinto de la soledad*; thus, I shall consider the text as a meditation on the communicative short circuits that emerge when engaging with a culture as distinctive as that of Mexico.

## Understanding Paz via Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication emerged during the mid-twentieth century from the practical exigencies of US diplomats who were tasked with effectively and courteously communicating with foreign officials. The field of study was primarily the brainchild of anthropologists LaRay Barna (1922–2010) and Edward T. Hall (1914–2009).[4] The latter's experiences working at the US State Department and at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) during the height of the Cold War was crucial for his research.[5] Specifically, intercultural communication was born out of Hall's frustration that "culture be treated as an instrumental set of rules or 'cookbook' that white US American trainees could learn quickly then bring to bear as they pursued their assignments in foreign countries" (Leeds-Hurwitz 35). In hopes of instilling in Foreign Service agents a more nuanced and thus, more effective notion of cultural difference, Hall elaborated what he termed 'microcultural analysis,' which detailed the slight but important behavioral traits between interlocutors.[6] Those working in the service of US interests would, according to Hall, communicate more successfully with their respective international counterparts if they accounted for differences in tone of voice, gestures, notions of time, spatial relationships, and corporeal positioning.

This said, it may seem incongruous to propose that the key concepts provided by intercultural communication help elucidate Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad*, a text that continually reiterates the distinctive solitariness of the Mexican character, the Mexican's inability to communicate with others, and his tendency to resolve interpersonal differences by resorting to violence. But therein we see how intercultural communication categories of analysis can, indeed, dramatically decipher the most canonical of Paz's texts. Working as a diplomat, Paz, like Hall, spent considerable time interrogating how to best communicate across cultures. Although not trained as an anthropologist, Paz undoubtedly has a remarkably keen eye for cultural traits. Thus, Hall's and Paz's respective works are two attempts of many at the midcentury to interrogate intercultural relations in a world poignantly aware of the dire consequences of intercultural *mis*communication. While intercultural communication's terms provide a pragmatically oriented and anthropologically verifiable scheme with which to understand cultural differences, Paz's poetic and psychoanalytic unfolding of the 'Mexican character' expresses both the beauty and pain of living in a world where cultural differences exist. Both authors are looking for a way out of a lonely labyrinth—a postwar political stage gripped by the tense reticence of Cold War détente.

This line of analysis—seeing Paz not only as a poet, but also as an able diplomat of immense sociological and anthropological acuity—has gained purchase in recent years. Liliana Weinberg reads Paz as having a penetrating sense both of anthropology and aesthetics, two interests that inevitably served him well as a diplomat for the Mexican state, a role that tasked him with being one of Mexico's foremost intercultural communicators. Guillermo Sheridan, too, reflects on how Paz's work as a diplomat during the so-called Mexican Miracle effectively saved Paz from many of the excesses—wine, women, and song—that abounded in Mexico's midcentury and ostensibly could have curtailed his prolific career (315). Even more salient for our purposes here is the fact that both Sheridan and Froylán Enciso draw possible connections between *El laberinto de la soledad* and Paz's experience as a diplomat; both critics claim that Paz's time abroad provided the writer with a certain critical distance and, moreover, informed his politico-poetic vision of the world, which understood the Mexican nation-state as culturally, politically, and socially isolated (Enciso 166; Sheridan 332).

Indeed, anthropological issues innate to the field of intercultural communication form part of Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad* from the text's opening essay, "El Pachuco y otros extremos." Here, we witness what could be classified as an extreme case of intercultural communication breakdown—so extreme that it becomes somatized in a single, frenetic figure: the Pachuco, a Mexican-American who, living in the cultural frontier that is Los Angeles, constantly feels homeless. He represents the most acute form (or, better said, the most symptomatic example) of cross-cultural conflict: a subject possessed by dueling national identities. Furthermore—and

again signaling commonalities between Hall and Paz—"El Pachuco y otros extremos" essay weighs in on the notion of cultural relativism, a concept hotly debated during the first half of the twentieth century. Although the idea of cultural relativism had been elaborated previously in the nineteenth century, anthropologist Franz Boas (1858–1942) fleshed out the idea for modern times in his 1896 "The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology." Boas's influence was immense among anthropologists and especially in Mexico where his ideas were promoted by his student Manuel Gamio (1883–1960). Edward T. Hall, too, forwards a kind of cultural relativism with his proposition that communication—an activity all peoples participate in—equals culture (Neuliep 124–25). Since all culture is communication, reasons Hall, verbal and nonverbal cues can be learned; ultimately, understanding can be facilitated among diverse groups. With a nod toward the political, perhaps we could say that during the midcentury—again, an epoch largely defined by ongoing Cold War angst, when two divergent economic systems (capitalism and communism) were crafted in response to industrial society—both Paz and Hall queried what cultures around the globe shared. Appropriate for this historical moment, Paz's "El Pachuco y otros extremos" in *El laberinto de la soledad* engages the question of cultural relativity, seemingly accepting cultural relativism as true, but also underscoring the cultural specificity of the Pachuco—his quirky cultural traits that distance him from US culture, from Mexico, and even from himself: his uniqueness isolates him from the global community, rendering intercultural communication impossible:

> A todos, en algún momento, se nos ha revelado nuestra existencia como algo particular, intransferible y precioso. Casi siempre esta revelación se sitúa en la adolescencia. El descubrimiento de nosotros mismos se manifiesta como un sabernos solos; entre el mundo y nosotros se abre una impalpable, transparente muralla: la de nuestra conciencia. (29)

On one hand, Paz ironically intimates that all cultures are, at heart, relative: we are not meant to be convinced by the 'adolescent' who 'discovers' their 'existence' as something 'particular,' 'immutable,' and 'precious.' Like the Pachuco, we have all been duped "en algún momento" by the idea of our absolute distinctiveness—tricked by the idea that our own culture is special. On the other hand, Paz cannot deny that cultural traits are stubborn things that impede successful intercultural communication. Caught within US society yet confronted by Mexico's deep history of violence and conquest, the Pachuco—an unassimilated and un-acculturated Mexican residing in the United States—is special, disturbed, and spectral.

Paz recounts in "El Pachuco y otros extremos" how a fellow Mexican reacts to this cultural uniqueness while living in Berkeley:

> Sí, esto es muy hermoso, pero no logro comprenderlo del todo. Aquí hasta los pájaros hablan en inglés. ¿Cómo quieres que me gusten las flores si no conozco su nombre verdadero, su nombre inglés, un nombre que se ha fundido ya a los colores y a los pétalos, un nombre que ya es la cosa misma? (35)

In the United States, Mexicans (whether Pachucos or not) face communication breakdowns, when even names are enigmatic, uncertain, incommunicable: "el primer enigma es su nombre mismo: "pachuco," vocablo de incierta filiación, que dice nada y dice todo" (35). Caught in the middle of divergent lifeworlds, the Pachuco cannot craft an appropriate means of self-expression: "no quiere volver a su origen mexicano; tampoco—al menos en apariencia—desea fundirse a la vida norteamericana" (35). The Pachuco—perhaps like Paz and, moreover, the Mexican nation—finds himself dishearteningly isolated, a casualty of failed intercultural communication.[7]

In this way, Paz's description of the Pachuco is also a story of failed diplomacy. More pithily stated: the Pachuco figure's primary malaise—his crippling solitude—is also that which stymies the Mexican nation-state's international presence during the first half of the twentieth century.[8] Mexico's isolationism was only intensified with the rise of Francisco Franco in Spain,

a ruler rejected by Mexico's leftist government. Moreover, although the real story of diplomatic collaboration between the United States and Mexico from roughly 1910 to 1950 may have been, at heart, amicable, their international relationship was, at least in the popular imagination, antagonistic (Ramos). In his post as a diplomat, Paz tasked himself with wedging Mexico's foreign service out from his home country's labyrinthine isolation (Sheridan 332). Finally, Paz's sense of Mexico's isolation on the international stage was likely affected by his inability to support a Stalinist USSR.[9] Indeed, the existence of Russian gulags was well known by the time Paz was penning *El laberinto de la soledad* in the late 1940s.[10] Paz even refers to concentration camps in "Todos los Santos, Día de Muertos," although we should acknowledge that it is unclear whether he is writing about Nazi camps or Stalinist ones. No matter the case, it is of note that even in murdering others, Paz proposes that Mexicans act differently than those operating said concentration camps.[11] The uniqueness of the Mexican character, it seems, even influences the most heinous of human activities. Whether as a collective nation or as individuals, Paz reads the Mexican as unable to communicate interculturally: "Vivimos ensimismados, como esos adolescentes taciturnos" (40).

We can be even more specific as to how intercultural communication helps to unfold *El laberinto de la soledad*. The field of study provides conceptual resources with which to interpret cultural differences and explore those situations in which differences impede communication. Anthropologists Edward T. Hall, LaRay Barna, William B. Gudykunst, and Geert H. Hofstede crafted the primary categories of analysis employed by intercultural communications. Each of these academics added a unique voice to the field of study, collectively crafting a toolkit with which to pragmatically understand a particular culture and, moreover, facilitate communication between people of different cultures. While Hall in *The Silent Language* was first to elaborate the idea of characterizing cultures in terms of monochronic versus polychronic time, his 1976 text *Beyond Culture* examined the notion of high context versus low context cultures. Geert Hofstede, in turn, in the 1980 text *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values*, works out a broad framework for understanding cultural difference comprised of five dimensions: these include power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, masculinity, and long-term versus short-term orientation.[12]

Thus, I shall briefly explain the above intercultural communication categories before employing them to decipher Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad*. My selection of terms are those I deem most comprehensible and compelling for college students, and which are employed by James A. Neuliep in the textbook most regularly used in undergraduate courses, *Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach*.

## *El laberinto de la soledad* in Five Dimensions

Perhaps intercultural communication's most useful set of designations is Hall's discussion of high context versus low context cultures. As Neuliep explains, a high context culture is one in which "meanings are gleaned from the physical, social, and psychological contexts" (470), while a low context culture is one in which "meanings are encoded in the verbal code" (471). Those interactants in a high context culture thus need to decipher a nonverbal and restricted code that consists largely of gestures, proxemics, and tone of voice. It is the context, rather than the actual words exchanged, which more dramatically informs the interaction between individuals and which conveys meaning interpersonally. In this type of cultural setting, physical space is crucial, as is the status of those who interact.[13] In low context cultures, alternatively, meaning between participants is expressed primarily via complex verbal constructions: requests, doubts, fears, and desires are spelled out explicitly.

It becomes immediately apparent that while the United States is, in broad terms, a low context culture, Mexico exemplifies a high context culture. In this sense, perhaps it is not hyperbolic to label the United States and Mexico—as Alan Riding pithily and polemically has put it—"distant

neighbors." One only need stroll through New York's Times Square at night, illuminated with an improbable but orderly hodgepodge of floating, neon words, to realize that the United States is a low context society. With but a smattering of English (and a healthy bank account) one can, in fact, find their way: obtaining tickets to a Broadway play, a Sabrett hot dog, or a Late Show souvenir. Alternatively, one need only to visit the *tianguis* in Ocosingo, Chiapas to understand Mexico as a high context society. Pushing one's way through the cobbled, crowded side streets, ducking under a tarp stretched across a metal pole like an awning, we hear the loopy whistle of the knife-sharpener (*el afilador*) as he offers to magically (and wordlessly) transform the back of his moped into a whetting stone. Continuing through the town, one may notice black ribbons hung sadly over doorways, unknowing perhaps who has died or even unaware what this somber and silent gesture represents. Finally, on a winding bus ride through the dense green mountains of Chiapas en route to Palenque, one may be stopped by a policeman who—via a series of innuendoes, gestures, and pauses—attempts to shake you down for that most Mexican of traditions, a *mordida*.

Explaining cultural difference in this way, I propose, immediately renders Paz's description of the 'Mexican character'—and likewise, the counterpoised 'American character'—as far less cryptic, less susceptible to stereotypical readings and flat, facile oversimplifications. Rather, they appear as Paz intended them to be: as both myths and realities. In the "Máscaras mexicanas" chapter of *El laberinto de la soledad*, Paz describes the Mexican in the following way:

> Su lenguaje está lleno de reticencias, de figuras y alusiones, de puntos suspensivos; en su silencio hay repliegues, matices, nubarrones, arcos iris súbitos, amenazas indescifrables. Aun en la disputa prefiere la expresión velada a la injuria: "al buen entendedor pocas palabras." (50)

In high context societies like Mexico, Paz, too, understands that circumlocutory asides are privileged over precise communiqués. Such is, at least in part, what Paz refers to as "el amor a la forma" (53). Although Paz, the poet and occasional surrealist, cannot help but describe his countrymen via elliptical prose tussled by an undercurrent of violence, if we read between the lines, his account of Mexican culture, at heart, could very well be found in a guidebook for diplomats visiting a foreign land (King).

In yet other ways Hall's notion of high context illuminates Paz's interpretation of Mexico. In a high context society, one's self-concept may not be compatible with one's public behavior: individuals are deeply interdependent, communicative codes are restricted, and approval from society is of the utmost importance. To make organizations run smoothly, to maintain the status quo, and perhaps to bring peace of mind to the greatest number of people, citizens are expected to assume a role they have been assigned almost since birth. In such a society, perhaps even a single political party can be elected for upwards of seventy years. Allusions—rather than explicit expressions—triumph in high context cultures; and this, paired with an aversion to social mobility, creates a scenario in which individuals are asked to be what they are not. Little wonder, then, that Paz describes his representative Mexican as:

> [un] simulador [que] pretende ser lo que no es. Su actividad reclama una constante improvisación, un ir hacia adelante siempre, entre arenas movedizas. A cada minuto hay que rehacer, recrear, modificar el personaje que fingimos, hasta que llega el momento en que realidad y apariencia, mentira y verdad, se confunden. (62)

In *El laberinto de la soledad*, Paz describes a Mexican society—perhaps not satisfied—but at least stupefied by the status quo. Born into a stable but oftentimes undignified social role, the Mexican maintains a lie so as to grease the wheels of hierarchical society. The rule of the day in Mexico all too often seems to be go with the flow, accept the life you were born into, don't make waves, keep on keepin' on. Against the crippling power of what Ángel Rama referred to as the "lettered city"—adorned with municipal flags and church regalia, buttressed by a vast judicial

system, and 'justified' by ever-present cognoscenti—inertia becomes the most ready response of the great majority (Rama). "La mentira posee una importancia decisiva en nuestra vida cotidiana, en la política, el amor, la amistad. Con ella no pretendemos nada más engañar a los demás, sino a nosotros mismos" (Paz 62). Indeed, Paz presents the Mexican as duplicitous—but only to the extent that s/he wants to survive.

This brings us to another of intercultural communication's more potent concepts: power distance. Hofstede explains power distance as the dispersal of status within society. That is, cultures that express a large power distance are those where inequality is more readily accepted and oftentimes understood as a natural aspect of life (28).[14] Low power distance cultures, alternatively, are those in which individuals—although they may belong to distinct social classes—do not experience an inordinate imbalance of power. In such cultures, subordinates can and do challenge their superiors: people queue up to decide who should be attended to first, and in business meetings underlings can make suggestions for improving company procedures. While Mexico, India, and Malaysia are high power distance cultures, the United States, Britain, and Germany are low power distance cultures (Neuliep 84).

Finally, although power distance and cultural context (whether a culture is high or low context) are not necessarily related, it stands to reason that high context cultures may be more compatible with large power distance societies.[15] The gestures, circuitous talk, and roundabout physical signs of high context cultures may be better suited for a society of unequals, where power disjoints could be better 'digested' as part of the natural order of things. Again, invoking one of the consummate institutions of Mexico, the *mordida* may best serve to explain the concept: excuses, physical cues, and meandering talk of big men behind the scenes are all employed to shake down those who do not evince the same power as others.

In his own way, Paz signals the notion of power distance very clearly in his discussion of the Pachuco, a figure who, neither assimilated to nor acculturated within US society, is rendered the most fragmented of subjects, a dispossessed wanderer:

> Cuando llegué a los Estados Unidos me asombró por encima de todo la seguridad y la confianza de la gente, su aparente alegría y su aparente conformidad con el mundo que los rodeaba. Esta satisfacción no impide, claro está, la crítica—una crítica valerosa y decidida, que no es muy frecuente en los países del Sur, en donde prolongadas dictaduras nos han hecho más cautos para expresar nuestros puntos de vista. Pero esa crítica respeta la estructura de los sistemas y nunca desciende hasta las raíces. (42)

Paz notes that in the United States—a low power distance culture—one is less impeded from criticizing his or her superior, for all are, at the end of the day, peers. In Latin America, adversely, Paz claims that individuals are more cautious about expressing dissent, as the culture is characterized by a larger power distance. In the above passage, Paz—attempting to elaborate an etiology of cultural symptoms—somewhat convincingly locates Latin America's naggingly undemocratic character in its experience with dictatorships. Later on in *El laberinto de la soledad*'s "Los hijos de la Malinche" chapter (and in a much more polemic and specious tone) Paz pinpoints Mexico's unequal power relationship in what effectively constitutes the primal scene of the Mexican nation: the sexual encounter of Hernán Cortés and Doña Marina. Ultimately, such an interpretation evokes a transhistorical air; nations do not, in fact, develop exactly like individuals.[16] A poet at heart, Paz seems uncertain how to historically ground Mexico's notably large power distance. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that Paz was not an astute observer of cross-cultural difference, nor was he blind to the long-term psychological, emotional, and cultural effects of political and social oppression.

What Paz signals as a distinctly Mexican fear of invasion—whether those invading be sixteenth-century Spaniards or twentieth-century Americans—ultimately coincides with another of the more formidable terms from the intercultural communication's conceptual toolkit: uncertainty avoidance. For Hofstede, the notion of uncertainty avoidance is used to account for

the fact that, in some cultures, individuals express a greater fear of the foreign, the abnormal, or the unexpected.[17] Cultures with a high uncertainty avoidance may be more likely to antagonize outsider elements. In such a culture, strangers are confronted with the steely sound of closing doors, terse answers, and squinting suspicion: essentially, Juan Preciado's experience when he arrives in Comala in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*. Significantly, these are among the tactics employed by Paz's Pachuco figure: "El hermetismo es un recurso de nuestro recelo y desconfianza. Muestra que instintivamente consideramos peligroso al medio que nos rodea" (51). Paz, like Hofstede, notes that such cultures are inclined to extreme vacillations in comportment, as individuals swing between reticent distrust and energetic, bellicose confrontation; if we were to deepen Paz's penchant for Freudianism, we might say the Pachuco's bipolarity—moving between puerile fits of anger and feigned audacity—is ultimately symptomatic of his weak ego-formation. As Paz explains, "las inesperadas violencias que nos desgarran, el esplendor convulso o solemne de nuestras fiestas, el culto a la muerte, acaban por desconcertar al extranjero" (88). What better description could be offered by both a diplomatic attaché, as well as a poet, than that which Paz offers here? I read it as an almost textbook example of an acute intercultural communication breakdown.

Intercultural communication's categories of uncertainty avoidance can also be used to unlock Paz's rather shrewd observation that Mexican society oftentimes evinces an intense—even extreme—attention to corporality and physical appearance. Better said, as a foreign visitor to Mexico, one need not appear terribly different than locals in order to garner a bevy of wayward glances, or the perennial catcall—"¡güeeey!" Angst provoked by difference is especially acute when one displays a phenotype, garb, or comportment unusual within Mexico; Caucasian Americans or Polanco jet-setters strolling through a market are bound to be regaled with a "Pásele güero/a." A will to avoid uncertainty induces an abundance of fixed gazes, a bevy of uncomfortable stares, and a number of interjections. Moreover, in cultures with a strong uncertainty avoidance principle, although individuals look to institutions to cultivate order, "they are often prepared to engage in risky behavior to reduce ambiguities, like starting a fight with a potential opponent rather than sitting back and waiting" (Gudykunst 19). As Paz similarly explains, "El mexicano, contra lo que supone una superficial interpretación de nuestra historia, aspira a crear un mundo ordenado conforme a principios claros. . . . El orden jurídico, social, religioso o artístico constituye una esfera segura y estable" (53). The notion of uncertainty avoidance ultimately even serves to decipher some of Paz's more poetic prose regarding the Mexican fixation on corporeality and aberrant physical characteristics:

> No nos da miedo ni vergüenza nuestro cuerpo; lo afrontamos con naturalidad y lo vivimos con cierta plenitud—a la inversa de lo que ocurre con los puritanos. Para nosotros el cuerpo existe; da gravedad y límites a nuestro ser. Lo sufrimos y gozamos; no es un traje que estamos acostumbrados a habitar, ni algo ajeno a nosotros: somos nuestro cuerpo. Pero las miradas extrañas nos sobresaltan, porque el cuerpo no vela intimidad, sino la descubre. (56)

Other commonsensical notions—corollaries to the concept of uncertainty avoidance—can be marshaled so as to further ground Paz's claims regarding the Mexican body. It stands to reason that the nagging privation of social mobility in Mexico affords the nation's citizens fewer opportunities for "self-fashioning"—sartorial panache, cultural slumming, and hipsterdom; simply said, confronted by a stagnant economy, it remains forever difficult to "dress the part."[18] This socioeconomic reality may even catalyze further cultural responses: Mexico's profuse body talk takes place not only in the public sphere but also within families. Here, focus on another's physical uniqueness oftentimes manifests itself via brutal but loving nicknames: chubby sons may be "gordito," bald fathers may be called "calvito," and short sisters can be called "chaparrita."

Finally, Mexican culture's heightened uncertainty avoidance (and concomitant focus on corporeality) is also indicative of its deep-seated collectivism—an intercultural communication term already explained above. Again, while in individualistic cultures, people strive to realize

self-fulfillment and autonomy, those in collectivistic cultures feel mutually obligated to each other and aim for in-group harmony and interdependence (Triandis).

Understanding Mexican society as collectivistic also serves us to interpret Paz's description of *fiestas*. Facile readings of *El laberinto de la soledad* have all too often emphasized the bacchanalian aspect of holidays in Mexico rather than stressing the fact that they (the *fiestas*) are more culturally significant due to their collectivistic character.[19] Ultimately, this interpretative misstep has promoted stereotypical, ahistorical, and shallow thinking both about Paz and about Mexico. Paz explains the collectivistic aspect of Mexican society:

> El solitario mexicano ama las fiestas y las reuniones públicas. Todo es ocasión para reunirse. Cualquier pretexto es bueno para interrumpir la marcha del tiempo y celebrar con festejos y ceremonias hombres y acontecimientos. Somos un pueblo ritual. . . . En pocos lugares del mundo se puede vivir un espectáculo parecido al de las grandes fiestas religiosas de México, con sus colores violentos, agrios y puros y sus danzas, ceremonias, fuegos de artificio, trajes insólitos y la inagotable cascada de sorpresas de los frutos, dulces y objetos que se venden esos días en plazas y mercados. (68)

This passage, too, can be analyzed via intercultural communication's terminology; not only does it allow us to signal the collectivistic and spatial aspect of Mexican *fiestas*—these spectacular "reuniones públicas" that take place in "plazas y mercados"—but it also gestures toward Mexico's distinctive relation to temporality: as Paz explains, no matter the time of year or what work obligations may be, "[t]odo es ocasión para reunirse."

Indeed, much of Paz's "Todos Santos, Día de Muertos" chapter deals with Mexico's conception of time vis-a-vis the nation's festivals; according to Paz, Mexico's insatiable hunger for parties—and, moreover, for the collectivistic—can never properly jibe with national or liturgical calendars:

> El tiempo deja de ser sucesión y vuelve a ser lo que fue, y es, originalmente: un presente en donde pasado y futuro al fin se reconcilian. Pero no bastan las fiestas que ofrecen a todo el país la Iglesia y la República. La vida de cada ciudad y de cada pueblo está regida por un santo, al que se festeja con devoción y regularidad. (69)

With this, Paz convincingly describes how chronologies—either religious or national—have been imposed upon Mexican society at different points in history. Although Paz's distinctive prose may render these impositions as somewhat opaque, he is ultimately describing a broader process of modernity, time awareness, and work-discipline such as that thoroughly outlined by another of his contemporaries, E. P. Thompson. Significant for our considerations here is the fact that intercultural communication's founder, Edward T. Hall in *The Silent Language* describes the particular cultural valence of time roughly a decade before Thompson's "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" article. Like Thompson and moreover, like Paz, Hall also proposes a scenario of dueling and culturally specific temporalities; some chronologies are imposed from above, others take root in cultures in a *sui generis* manner.

Intercultural communication understands those cultures that evince a diminished sense of scheduling, a lesser need to compartmentalize time, and an orientation to the past as polychronic. Polychronic (or P-time) cultures also demonstrate more flexibility in terms of allowing for multiple activities to take place simultaneously. Alternatively, monochronic (or M-time) cultures are oriented toward the future and emphasize the measurement of time and the maintenance of tight schedules (Neuliep 162). Although it would be specious to categorize any culture as either exclusively polychronic or exclusively monochronic, anyone who has hopped in a *colectivo* in Mexico, tried to grab a waiter's attention during a major sporting event, or taken part in business meetings would naturally understand our southern neighbors as generally oriented toward P-time. Paz explicitly describes Mexico's polychronic orientation—even against the false imposition of M-time—when he describes how, during festivals, "el tiempo deja de ser

sucesión y vuelve a ser lo que fue, y es, originalmente" (69). The convulsive ebbs and flows of Paz's prose, replete with shifting tenses and comma splices ("lo que fue, y es, originalmente") underscore the writer's message: Mexican identity has been, throughout history, rocked back and forth by the vicissitudes of politics, commerce, and even chronology. In the undergraduate classroom, such a discussion serves to counter those more injurious interpretations which brand Mexicans merely as party animals, dawdlers, or even lazy. Understanding *El laberinto de la soledad* via intercultural communication's time terminology, moreover, provides instructors with an opportunity to discuss how subjects are subsumed by capitalist modes of production and, ultimately, made to understand that 'time is money.' Finally, instructors could also historicize the practice of celebrating "San Lunes," which saw work-disciplines—that had been handed down by colonialists—briefly upended by polychronic and carnivalesque crapulence.[20] Ultimately, Paz's text is characterized by a multitude of cultural voices; via both form and content, *El laberinto de la soledad* demands that readers open themselves up to diversity.

## Conclusions

I have proposed a novel interpretation of *El laberinto de la soledad* which recasts the foremost intellectual of twentieth-century Mexico not as a loutish promoter of macho men behaving badly in the name of skewed notions of authentic 'Mexican identity' but rather, as a subtle, poetic mind who apprehends cultural identity dialectically and diplomatically. Paz's *El laberinto* shares many of the same concerns that the field of intercultural communication takes on; here, by activating some of the terminology from this field, I have attempted to unknot Paz's highly stylized prose and thus shed light on his more diplomatic-minded concerns, as well as his understanding of Mexican culture as an ongoing process that, for better or for worse, is subjected to reification. The fact that Paz's literary flourishes oftentimes occlude his keen anthropological observations should not, I argue, diminish his ambitious cultural interpretation of Mexican society.

This reading of Paz will better serve our multicultural classrooms both now and in the future; it is, I argue, more befitting our present political moment, when the notion of a racially and linguistically homogeneous United States has once again, and heinously, gotten ample airplay, been promoted by television pundits, and even found its way into the platform of a major political party during the 2016 Presidential Elections. The more jingoistic impulses of everyday Americans have been stoked, and borders—whether real, imagined, or affective—have again assumed a new salience. History does seem to be repeating itself; in recent months, our world seems to be increasingly defined by tense, conflictive exchanges between two primary hegemons vying for power over periphery players deemed ripe for influence or outright manipulation. Against this backdrop, I have argued here that intercultural communication remains a cogent scholarly apparatus with which to comprehend our diverse world. Furthermore, demographic ebbs and flows within the United States, I believe, will only underscore the compelling nature of my interpretation. Paz did not understand the Pachuco—like a certain presidential candidate put it—as one of many border-crossing "bad hombres." Rather, the Pachuco is both a pitiful traveller and a dreamer, caught between cultures, without recourse to ambassadorial acuity. In short, rather than building walls between teachers, students, and cultures, Paz's *El laberinto de la soledad* continues to challenge us, over sixty years after its publication, to cross pedagogical, scholarly, and especially, political and cultural borders.

## NOTES

[1] Gutmann writes, "In the late 1940s, Octavio Paz dissected Mexican machismo, and his work has come to represent the official view of essential Mexican attributes: like machismo, loneliness, and mother worship."

[2] Discovered via Internet search, Neuliep's *Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach*, now in its sixth edition, is taught at the University of Texas, Louisiana State University, and the University of Florida.

[3] Bennett writes, "One way to reduce this ambiguity in intercultural interactions is to develop *intercultural competence*, a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts" (XXIII; emphasis in original).

[4] Bennett reminds us that "LaRay Barna and Edward T. Hall each initiated courses in intercultural communication. At Portland State University (Oregon), Barna realized that international students experience severe culture shock due to their lack of understanding of American culture. At the US Foreign Service Institute, Hall realized that members of the foreign service need more than history and political science to succeed in their work" (XXIII–XXVII).

[5] Leeds-Hurwitz located intercultural communication's origins with the foundation of the FSI in 1946 and explains that "the parameters of the field were established in response to a particular set of problems" (35).

[6] The term "intercultural communication" was first used by Hall in his 1959 book *The Silent Language*—now understood as the field's foundational text. See Rogers, Hart, and Miike for more information.

[7] Quiroga echoes Paz's solitude when he writes that "Paz repeatedly mentioned the year 1943 and his absence from Mexico for nine years as marking an epochal change for him. During those nine years, Paz lived in the United States and, later, in France, India, Japan, and Switzerland as a member of the Mexican diplomatic corps" (59).

[8] Ruano characterizes Mexican foreign policy during the Cold War as isolationist (12).

[9] Quiroga states, "It is important to understand *The Labyrinth of Solitude* as growing out of Paz's growing disaffection with the political developments of his time. He returned from Spain in 1938 full of political conviction that he expressed in a series of articles written for *El popular*, the pro-Communist paper of the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos. After the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 and Trotsky's assassination in Mexico, Paz stopped writing for *El popular* and two years later, in 1941, entered into a dispute with Pablo Neruda over politics. In these shifts we can see Paz more vocally expressing his disaffection with the nationalist interpretation of Mexican reality" (58).

[10] Quiroga, in turn, explains that Paz was writing *El laberinto de la soledad* around 1948–49 in Paris (60). See Applebaum for Russian gulags (58).

[11] In the chapter "Todos Santos, Día de Muertos" in *El laberinto de la soledad*, Paz writes, "Cuando el mexicano mata—por vergüenza, placer o capricho—mata a una persona, a un semejante. Los criminales y estadistas modernos no matan: suprimen. Experimentan con seres que han perdido ya su calidad humana. En los campos de concentración primero se degrada al hombre; una vez convertido en objeto, se le extermina en masa" (82).

[12] The 1980s saw a fifth dimension added to intercultural communication: 'Long-term versus Short-term Orientation.'

[13] Bolewski writes, "High context communication implies the transfer of frequent unspoken messages within communication; communication occurs through allusion, making the context of what is said as important as the content. Conversely, low context communication contains the exchange of all intended information through speaking; hardly anything is implied apart from what is explicitly spoken" (154).

[14] Hofstede suggests, "Power distance can therefore be defined as *the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally*. "Institutions" are the basic elements of society like the family, school, and the community; 'organizations' are the places where people work" (*Cultures and Organizations* 28).

[15] Hofstede includes a chart characterizing Mexico as both a high power distance society as well as a society with a high uncertainty avoidance index (*Cultures and Organizations* 141).

[16] Del Val discusses the Mexican as an "arquetipo transhistórico" (332).

[17] Hofstede writes that "Uncertainty Avoidance as a characteristic of a culture defines the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which they perceive as unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable, situations which they therefore try to avoid by maintaining strict codes of behaviour and a belief in absolute truths. Cultures with a strong uncertainty avoidance are active, aggressive, emotional, compulsive, security-seeking, and intolerant; cultures with a weak uncertainty avoidance are contemplative, less aggressive, unemotional, relaxed, accepting personal risks, and relatively tolerant" ("Cultural Differences" 308).

[18] See Reeves for a discussion of Mexico's lack of social mobility. With "self-fashioning," I am referencing the concept as elaborated by Greenblatt.

[19] For more information, see the abridged version of Paz's "Todos Santos" essay in García-Serrano (20–24).

[20] Lear writes, "Workers generally received their pay after work on Saturday, and many drank through Sunday, taking "San Lunes" off to recuperate" (95).

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