
“TAKE OFF THAT STREETWALKER’S DRESS”

Concha Michel and the Cultural Politics of Gender in Postrevolutionary Mexico

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Remembered as the constant companion of Mexican artists Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, the folksinger Concha Michel achieved notoriety for providing the soundtrack of Mexico’s cultural Left. However, she also authored many works of poetry and prose that critiqued liberal, Marxist, and Catholic universalisms—all while maintaining a tireless pace as a teacher and activist. This article offers a methodological exploration of how Michel used personal anecdotes to fashion a universal cosmology and political philosophy grounded in gender complementarity and indigenous authenticity.

Esta mi autobiografía nadie la podría narrar
pues lo anterior de mi vida nadie puede adivinar.

Nobody would be able to narrate this, my autobiography,
since no one could guess what has come before.

Concha Michel, “Autobiografía”

The Mexican activist and folksinger Concha Michel has long fascinated both feminists and aficionados of Mexico City’s intriguing cultural Left, a group that in the 1920s and ’30s included scores of artists and intellectuals who sought political or cultural refuge there. Zelig-like, Michel appeared at nearly every high-profile event in women’s activist and leftist cultural gatherings, providing the soundtrack for Communist Party meetings, expeditions by rural organizers, and countless gatherings at the Coyoacán home of the artists Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera.¹ She posed in Rivera’s murals and sang at Kahlo’s exhibitions; performed at New York City’s newly inaugurated Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and at the home of the aging J. D. Rockefeller; conferred with feminist theorists Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai, and Lenin’s widow, “La Krupskaya”; and cajoled Mexican presidents Lázaro Cárdenas and José López Portillo. Instead of Zelig’s chameleon-like qualities, however, Michel strove for a corporeal and intellectual timelessness and distinctiveness, donning richly embroidered indigenous dresses and coiling her braids atop her head in the style of Mexico’s native women. This embodied performance, which became her signature attribute, led many observers to ascribe to Michel an

authentically Mexican feminism, one grounded in indigenous cultures and veneration of motherhood and family.²

The Mexican cultural intelligentsia has had a decades-long fascination with Michel, which was most recently fueled by the intensified *fridamanía* accompanying the 2007 centenary of Kahlo's birth.³ Kahlo and Michel sang duets together at the unveiling of a mural by Kahlo's students, and Mexican historian and cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis has described Michel singing and playing guitar while accompanying Rivera and Kahlo to protest the CIA-orchestrated overthrow of Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz and, shortly thereafter, at Kahlo's memorial in the Palacio de Bellas Artes.⁴ In addition to appearing in two of Rivera's murals, Michel developed close ties with some of his most prominent wives and lovers, forging intimate friendships not only with Kahlo, but also, before her, with Guadalupe Marín, to whom Michel introduced Rivera, and with the Italian photographer Tina Modotti, her comrade-in-struggle.⁵ Elena Poniatowska, joining Monsiváis among Mexico's most illustrious writers and political commentators, credited Michel with analyzing sexism for Modotti, and Michel performed at Modotti's 1929 solo exhibition at the National Library, just as she would later for Kahlo's 1953 exhibition at the Palace of Fine Arts.⁶ The poet-journalist Alfredo Cardona Peña described the arts patron María Asúnsolo frantically seeking Michel to sing for a visiting Colombian delegation: "What is the number for Concha Michel, the great revolutionary singer? I want them to hear her!"⁷ Aztlán nationalists and at least one politically progressive musician have more recently adopted Michel as a malleable symbol of subaltern challenges to economic and cultural imperialism.⁸

By the 1970s, feminists claimed Michel as a "precursor" to Mexican feminism despite her gender essentialism and heteronormativity that would make most contemporary feminists blush.⁹ Michel's persistent appeal among Mexican feminists appears even more curious given that, despite her life-long dedication to writing, speaking, and organizing around improving Mexican women's rights and status, Michel disavowed any association with feminism.¹⁰ "Well, in reality I've never been a feminist," Michel explained to an interviewer in the 1970s. "If you insist on calling me a precursor to feminism, that's your affair, but I concern myself with women's problems in trying to find a solution to the human problem."¹¹ Indeed, most contemporary feminist theorists would likely concur with Michel's assessment, given her emphasis on a biological essentialism that both built upon and contributed to the Mexican and Latin American feminist tradition of gender complementarity. "To me, it appears extremely urgent that women rectify their attitude," she explained, chafing at the feminist commitment to sex equality, "since they are so confused that they normally assimilate

themselves into the system and behave as if they were men, forgetting that there is a strictly feminine manner of being that should temper the masculine perspective that currently governs human society."¹² Situating herself ideologically and politically amid intense debates over women's roles in development, decolonization, and modernization, the erstwhile Partido Comunista de México (Mexican Communist Party) member distanced herself from the middle-class movement perceived by many as a foreign import and described herself instead as a "humanist," insisting that women could only achieve gains by improving the human condition. "No more talk of feminism," she would scrawl on the back of a feminist pamphlet, "but rather of human integrity."¹³

Michel's appeal to both cultural nationalists and contemporary feminists stems largely from her simultaneous claims to universality and particularity, to a rootless cosmopolitanism and an assertively autochthonous indigeneity. Her dress, her musical performances, her writings—ranging from didactic theater to poetry to political pamphlets—and even her physical bearing allowed her to inhabit a Mexican identity without seeming parochial and a feminist identity without seeming westernized. She wrote across a dizzying array of genres, constructing a revolutionary vision that sought to universalize the particular—substituting reproductive labor for wage labor, indigenous cosmologies for the Christian trinity, and the specificity of experience for the abstractions of theory. If Michel understood indigenous cosmologies and cultural authenticity as constructs—as much of an imaginary as the Holy Trinity and capitalist economies that she disparaged as oppressive, patriarchal fictions—she did not let on. Indeed, her continued appeal as a subaltern icon rests largely on her unshakable faith in local epistemologies and practices as natural and organic alternatives to artificial, imported gender ideologies and practices. Her emphasis on the local and particular became legible only in reference to the universalizing claims of Catholicism, Marxism, and liberalism that defined prevailing political and social discourses.¹⁴ To counter these models, Michel offered a political and social critique based on a romanticized indigenous cosmology of gender duality. In a gesture we have come to think of as provincializing the hegemonic, Michel argued that her universalizing model, which she understood as less patriarchal and less commodity-driven than those coming from Europe and the United States, should displace these other paradigms.¹⁵ She sought not a return to the local but rather a new universalism, albeit one grounded in a novel set of cultural assumptions.

Drawing on research for a full-length biography of Michel, this article considers her pull as a homegrown feminist through the narratives that she fashioned about her life story, particularly her early years, as the foundation

for her political philosophy. Many telling and entertaining episodes pepper Michel's interviews—"her anecdotes would fill volumes," one interviewer noted—establishing key tropes in her life story: challenging authority, the labors of social and biological reproduction, and the superiority of indigenous over western cultures.¹⁶ Often comical and disarmingly self-effacing—about her plan to kill and bury Diego Rivera beneath the orange tree in his second patio to punish his womanizing or about former president Plutarco Elías Calles duping her as she led a takeover of his *hacienda*—these stories, with their selective inclusions and elisions, both established her political legitimacy and served as didactic parables to bolster her theoretical claims.¹⁷ Her storytelling simultaneously embeds her philosophy in her biographical particulars and abstracts it to make universal claims for a political economy that values caring labors and a revolutionary model rooted in Mexican indigenous cultures.¹⁸ These anecdotes, with all their inconsistencies and contradictions, highlight the methodological challenges of biography, particularly the elusiveness of experience and representation.¹⁹

Telling Tales: Methodology and Biographical Anecdotes

Taking seriously historian Joan Scott's caution that biography tends to emphasize "autonomous individual will rather than the effect of a historically defined process which forms subjects," this article explores Michel's anecdotes to examine the "discursive processes—the epistemologies, institutions, and practices—that produce political subjects, that make agency (in this case the agency of feminists) possible even when it is forbidden or denied."²⁰ Like Scott's Olympe de Gouges, Michel came of political age amid a tumultuous revolution and advanced her political philosophy through a self-representation that took revolutionary promises seriously, presuming the postrevolutionary regime fully intended to deliver on its pledge to social justice and political equality. Like de Gouges, Michel would "align herself with creative minds" in order to "win recognition of her capacity for self-representation (and hence of her right to political representation) on the strength of her imagination."²¹

To analyze Michel's anecdotes, I draw most heavily on the observations of historian Daniel James, whose interpretation of the Argentine labor activist Doña María Roldán's life history incorporates studies of narrative, folklore, literary theory, and oral history—from Erving Goffman to Victor Turner to Carolyn Steedman—to explore the politics and subjectivities embedded in these self-representations. In addition to the more conspicuous efforts to impose coherence and fashion meaning out of one's life—the staving off of an "epistemological crisis"—these stories also, often through

their elisions and obfuscations, reveal both personal and historical anxieties and aspirations.²² As James has explained, "Anecdotes are, then, in some fundamental way morality tales with both a social and individual register: they are about proper and improper behavior, responsible and irresponsible actions, about the way the world is and the way it ought to be."²³ James joins such historians as Gyan Prakash in taking up theorist Gayatri Spivak's warning against the "too-easy reading off of a subaltern woman's voice from the transcript of an oral testimony."²⁴ Michel's anecdotal style bears out patterns James notices in his conversations with Roldán. Michel bolsters her legitimacy as a public intellectual through repeated references to Mexico's most prominent cultural and political figures and highlights her challenges to authority figures. Her kinetic and dialogic stories, serving to "increase narrative vividness and highlight particular exchanges," often sound like fables with caricatured actors who seem to stand more for ideas than for historical figures.²⁵ Like Roldán, Michel frequently emphasizes not only her personal bravery and rhetorical prowess, but also her respectability and physical beauty.

These stories both facilitate and frustrate the biographer's conventional tasks. On the one hand, they reveal personality traits—about Michel's affect, aspirations, or sense of humor—and details about events or people she met. The very fact that she recounted them so often demonstrates her awareness about narrative's role in self-representation and her conceptions of "the way the world ought to be." On the other hand, the stories never quite add up. Events do not fit into a clear timeline—sometimes contradicting themselves within a single interview.²⁶ Even the basic facts remain in dispute. Although interviews consistently cite her birth date as 1899, for example, Michel's descendants have indicated that she may have been born four or five years earlier, but her birth and baptismal records were destroyed during the Cristero rebellions (1926–1929).²⁷ While this fudging explains the particular murkiness of her childhood timeline, the challenge of weaving these stories together into a coherent narrative persists throughout her life story.

As the considerable literature on historical memory and testimonial literature demonstrates, the veracity of these narratives—whether she was born in 1899 or 1894, whether she truly planned to kill Rivera, etc.—remain not only difficult to ascertain but also arguably less interesting than the epistemological questions that they allow us to explore. The stories Michel told on herself, which circulated through newspapers and magazines as well as by word of mouth and such prominent chroniclers as the flamboyant Salvador Novo, take on particular meanings when understood alongside her political and cultural interventions, which ranged from essays and pamphlets to *corridos* (ballads) and popular theater. Michel's corporeal and

anecdotal self-representations—her claims to physical strength and beauty, to rhetorical and political bravery, and, improbably enough, to an authentic indigeneity—all resonated with the political projects she pursued through writing, activism, government service, and cultural production.

Fashioning a Life: Anecdotes and Embodiment

Born at the end of the nineteenth century in the tiny southwestern town of Villa de Purificación near the coast of Jalisco, Michel moved with her family to Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, where her father traded with the foreign ships that docked there. Orphaned at a young age, Michel was raised primarily by her sister Albina, fifteen years her senior. Their beliefs revealed their distinct comings-of-age but shared a notable intensity of conviction. While Michel witnessed the violent Mexican Revolution (1910–1917) during her formative years, Albina, who had grown up in Jalisco during the Porfiriato, the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, held to the strong Catholic beliefs that would make the region the center of the Cristero rebellions against the Jacobin revolutionary regime. Family lore held that when Albina once found herself in jail for her Cristero activities, the authorities asked her how to contact her nearest relation. My sister, she informed them, is in the adjacent cell with the Communists.²⁸

Reportedly deemed “ungovernable,” Michel entered the San Ignacio de Loyola convent school in Ejutla, Jalisco at age seven and stayed for four years.²⁹ The convent had been constructed by her grandfather, a wealthy landowner Michel dubbed “a feudal lord,” who had joined the French during the French Intervention (1861–1864).³⁰ A mainstay of Michel’s anecdotal repertoire—a story that often opened feature articles, demonstrating her rebellious, anticlerical, and aesthetically discerning impulses—involved her setting fire to a statue at her convent school. “There once was a girl in a Jalisco convent,” wrote Alfredo Cardona Peña, “beautiful as a dappled sky, restless as a butterfly in a net.”³¹ In this interview and others, Michel recalls that she entered the chapel and ignited the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Michel explained to Poniatowska, “I was rebellious from birth. At age seven, I set fire to a Sacred Heart to burn down the whole convent. [Poniatowska: Why?] Because it was an ugly, horrible sculpture that antagonized me terribly; so I the put votive lamp up to it so that it would burn, and the nuns came and put out my fire. They were so innocent, the poor things, that they never imagined that I had set the fire intentionally.”³²

Although chafing under the convent’s discipline, she learned to sing and play guitar, and her gravelly contralto voice earned her a generous stipend to study at the Guadalajara conservatory, developing a repertoire

of the most challenging operatic roles. "And then I left everything for the Revolution," she told an interviewer in 1983, "It seemed more interesting to me to see what the people said. And I liked it."³³ The various iterations of her decision to abandon opera all reflected this ethos prizing popular, local, and indigenous cultural production over elite imports. Her lifelong dedication to collecting and disseminating folk culture—first traveling the country and then, in 1950, establishing the Folklore Institute in Morelia, Michoacán—doubtless heightened her need to represent her decision as intentional and principled.

She apparently had other reasons to leave the conservatory, however. Before her sixteenth birthday, Michel gave birth to her first child, a daughter named Yolia. The child's father, a wealthy law student from Chihuahua named Fernando Cásares, decided not to marry Michel for fear that it would hinder his career, completed his law degree, and married a *rica* (rich woman).³⁴ After working briefly in the United States, Michel moved to Mexico City, placing Yolia in a foundling home (*casa de cuna*) in Tacubaya while she worked in a guesthouse in Colonia Guerrero.³⁵ Her daughter promptly contracted bronchial pneumonia and died at seventeen months. Michel, still mourning her daughter's death, married the German-Austrian Pablo Rieder, with whom she had a son, Godofredo. Twenty years her senior, Rieder attempted to impose restrictions that Michel found suffocating; they divorced soon after Godo's birth.

Michel's narrations of her daughter's birth and death and her subsequent marriage to Rieder appear in several of Michel's late-life interviews, perhaps because the event figured prominently in her poem "Autobiography" from her 1974 book *Dios-Principio es la pareja*.³⁶ Most accounts agree on the above outline of these events, but the two most detailed descriptions she offers diverge on important details. Michel told Poniatowska that she met the child's father in Guadalajara and traveled to the town of Acámbaro to give birth "because in those days, people pounced on you if you weren't married."³⁷ She explained that in Acámbaro she talked to people who had gone to the United States, so she went to make a living as a singer, but "they deported me with all the people they deported to Mexico." Michel recounted poignant details about her daughter's short life and recalled, "When the girl died, I wanted to throw myself under a streetcar, to be done with my life, because I was so horribly sad."

In another interview, she tells the story slightly differently. "Initially, I went to the United States," she explained, "and dedicated myself to working there, but since my hope was that I could work out my problems in Mexico, I decided to repatriate myself, traveling by railroad and arriving in Mexico City."³⁸ In response to a query about why Cásares had not assumed

his paternal responsibilities, Michel recalled living briefly with the father's family in Chihuahua but that "*la señora* [her mother-in-law] came to hate me so much that on one occasion she chased me through the street with a dagger." This narrative, like many others, seems to confound any effort to recreate her difficult journey, leaving unclear when she lived with Yolia's father and why he offered no support to alleviate her destitution.

Regardless of the story's details, in its broadest outlines it clearly served a didactic purpose, bolstering her critique of conventional Marxist conceptions of class. The daughter of a wealthy merchant and granddaughter of a landed aristocrat, Michel slid swiftly from the comfortable life of a rising opera star to near indigence following her unplanned pregnancy. For the next four decades, Michel argued against a purely class-driven analysis, in which women's status generally depended on that of their husbands or fathers, asserting that it ignored the biological fact of women's childbearing, the social reality of motherhood, and women's unremunerated labors.³⁹ In poetry and prose, as well as interviews and songs, Michel insisted that the revolution would remain incomplete until men could give birth and society developed a political-economic system that ascribed value to the unmodified labor of reproducing families, cultures, and labor forces.

Although the timing of these dramatic events remains unclear, by the 1920s, Michel worked for the Cultural Missions program, a mobile branch of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (Secretariat of Public Education) established in 1923 that focused on educating and "Hispanicizing" rural and indigenous populations, and she traveled the country collecting folk-songs and developing ties to the Communist Party.⁴⁰ The villagers of Tepetitla, Tlaxcala, reported to the program that Michel had worked tirelessly, teaching women music and sewing during the day, organizing an evening theater festival, and teaching the men about political organizing and land reform at night.⁴¹ She delivered radio broadcasts about pre-Columbian societies and culture, often drawing on invented and romantic notions of indigeneity that had gained popularity during the 1920s. "For those of us who feel veneration for the artistic and cultural values of the true Mexico," the director of a Jalapa, Veracruz normal school wrote after listening to one of her broadcasts, "even the little we can derive from a strong and defined past that belligerent conquests, spiritual impositions, and antidemocratic governments could not completely destroy, labors such as yours are more than interesting affirmations of the social future."⁴² Michel's appeal then—as now—rested on her conjuring the *imaginario* of a heroic and egalitarian indigenous past, the "true Mexico" that would serve as a foundation for a revolutionary society cleansed of class and gender hierarchies.

Following a brief description of Michel's modest apartment in a working-class neighborhood of Mexico City, Poniatowska's celebratory

1977 interview poses to Michel a question overburdened with political and cultural implications: "Are you *tehuana*, Concha?" The question of her indigenous origins is obvious enough: Michel consistently wore the ornate *tehuana* dress and jewelry typical of the Zapotec women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, dedicated much of her life to collecting indigenous folk-songs, and made indigenous cosmologies central to her political philosophy. Describing Michel's braids "threaded with silver," her finely decorated *tehuana* dress, and her physically imposing figure, Poniatowska elaborates, "Concha Michel sits with her legs apart as the *tehuanas* allow them to, their hands on each knee, declaiming like ancient goddesses, goddesses of the earth who know everything about life, the flowers, love, and human suffering."⁴³ Michel frequently insisted upon her French heritage, noting, "What could be more French than the surname Michel?"⁴⁴ But in response to Poniatowska's question, she offered an account of how she had come to inhabit a *tehuana* identity. "I lived a long time in Espinal," she explained. "I went there to Tehuantepec many years ago and wanted to get a good outfit to wear to a big party like the ones they throw there—a really nice get-up with good embroidery—and I couldn't find anything. Until I arrived at [Arnulfa Pineda's] house, and she called to me, 'Concha, I have what you want. Put on this WOMAN'S outfit and take off that streetwalker's dress.' That was fifty years ago, and since then I have worn *tehuana* clothing."⁴⁵

Cardona Peña offers a somewhat different account of how Michel came to wear *tehuana* dress, indicating that she began wearing it regularly in the late 1940s.⁴⁶ After describing in a section on "personality and beauty" that she has "48 years in a well-preserved body of a beautiful woman, of white color and gray eyes with a touch of emerald," he describes how she came to his wedding in 1947:

dazzled with the richness of gold and sea and the earthly and demiurgic forces that came from the Zapotec race, to which my wife belongs. And in the shadow of the foliage, amid dancing to isthmian tunes [*sones*] and the frenzy of the fiesta and the women being crowned with violets, as in Greece, Concha strummed her guitar among the Juchitecan devils who listened to her sing, and she returned dressed in the *tehuana* outfit . . . making a very serious promise that she would not take off the traditional Tehuantepec dress for the rest of her life. And she goes out wearing it in the street, traveling in streetcars and busses with it on, and the outfit becomes the thousand marvels of her earthly body.

Michel insists in the Poniatowska interview, however, that when she left for New York City in 1932 she wore only "authentic" indigenous attire. "I went very well dressed," she explained, "because I wore my dresses from

Tehuantepec, my *charra* dresses [mariachi ensemble]; not the China Poblana dress. I don't like those outfits at all because they are false, with those giant eagles and that rubbish embroidery; the China Poblana dress is a terrible thing. Instead of that hideous dress, I had a red pleated skirt, a splendid, finely embroidered blouse. Well, I wore at least eight different outfits, and now I have thirty that are *huasteca* from San Luis Potosí and Hidalgo, but authentic outfits, not imitations."⁴⁷

Michel's insistence on sartorial authenticity and rejection of the "invented tradition" of the China Poblana, which she dubbed a garish manipulation of folkloric culture, signaled a commitment to rural folkloric and artisanal culture over a manufactured indigenism from urban centers and warned against Mexico's selling itself—prostituting itself—to Western ideals.⁴⁸ "To be truly Mexican," historian Rick López has noted, "one was expected to be part Indian or to demonstrate a concern for the valorization and redemption of the Mexican Indian as part of the nation. Those who rejected the country's Indianness were publicly chastised for their foreignness and lack of nationalist zeal."⁴⁹ Her insistence on *tehuana* dress, however, had a cultural politics of its own. As Deborah Poole reminds us, *tehuana* dress operated as a complex signifier in 1920s Mexico, functioning as a "national symbol and a lingering regional anxiety" about the relationship between local politics and the centralizing project of the postrevolutionary regime.⁵⁰ "The Tehuana's dress," Poole has explained, "acquires a symbolic life of its own independent from the body of the woman who wears it: a 'look' that is uprooted from place and, as such, accessible to women in many different places as an icon of a national identity."⁵¹ Thus, Michel's assertion that she had adopted *tehuana* dress by the 1920s not only linked her visually to more prominent figures such as Frida Kahlo, but also situated her within the postrevolutionary project of cultural nationalism.

The embodied practice of donning indigenous *traje* (garb) gestured both to Michel's family ties to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and to a paradoxically rootless cultural nationalism, demonstrating Michel's simultaneous commitment to an adopted indigeneity and to cosmopolitanism. A conservatory-trained opera singer who had chosen to "sing what the people sing" by traveling around the Mexican countryside collecting and disseminating folk tunes, and a French-descended merchant's daughter who literally fashioned herself into an icon of indigeneity, Michel also collaborated with Frances Toor, the U.S. expatriate publisher of the journal *Mexican Folkways*, and corresponded with Jackson Phillips, who introduced her to the Kentucky folklore community.⁵² By way of cosmopolitanism, Michel linked what she dubbed indigenous values of gender complementarity and popular culture to a transnational folklore movement that might construct a universalist project to rival those prevailing in Mexico: liberalism, Catholi-

cism, and Marxism. "Indoamerican wisdom," she would later explain to Poniatowska, "should be extended throughout the new world."⁵³

In Mexico, as elsewhere, the 1920s and '30s witnessed a particularly pronounced articulation between leftist politics and popular cultural expression, associated most strongly with the muralist movement.⁵⁴ These were exciting years in Mexico's cultural Left, which fostered an international aspect to Michel's political convictions. These artists and intellectuals did not agree on the meanings of the revolution or of *mexicanidad*, but they all perceived an opportunity to construct a new world out of the revolutionary devastation. Michel joined this vibrant group, drawing on the rhetoric and ideas generated during the revolution to imagine a world radically different. During the 1920s, she developed friendships with Rivera and Modotti, met the Soviet ambassador Alexandra Kollontai, and helped to establish the Revolutionary Writers and Artists League, which attracted adherents from Nicaragua, Cuba, and the United States as well as throughout Mexico.

For Michel as for most artists and intellectuals, however, cultural prominence and financial solvency required a Faustian bargain with the postrevolutionary state. State-sponsored intellectual and cultural production boomed during this period, producing such enduring works as the murals of Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, and the writings of José Vasconcelos (*La Raza Cósmica*) and Manuel Gamio (*Forjando Patria*). To be sure, the centralizing regime permeated and co-opted cultural production, and retaining its sponsorship required artists to avoid alienating high-level decision-makers. The historian Marjorie Becker has described Michel as part of a "posse" sent out to "discover and capture the Indians' essential behavior."⁵⁵ The cultural historian Aurelio Tello has identified Michel as among those who betrayed Mexico's *corrido* tradition by using it for propaganda and transforming it from an anonymous folk tradition to one where individuals claimed compositional credit.⁵⁶ The post-revolutionary regime may have considered its sponsorship of intellectual and cultural production as a means of social discipline, but its egalitarian revolutionary rhetoric created space to hold the regime accountable to those ideals.⁵⁷ While Michel worked for the government as one of the state's purveyors of Mexican culture, she also used the opportunities the government created for her to promote her own agenda.

"The world was my university": Experience and Theory in Michel's Political Thought

Mi Universidad fue el mundo; mi graduación, voluntaria directa fue mi experiencia, con la vida comprobada.

The world was my University; my graduation, voluntary
my experience was direct, confirmed by life.

Concha Michel, "Autobiografía"

It is difficult to pinpoint when Michel joined the Partido Comunista de México (PCM), partly because of the party's clandestine nature during the 1920s, but by 1930 the Mexican secret police identified her as a communist leader and the *compañera* of the PCM secretary general, Hernán Laborde.⁵⁸ She organized protests at the October 1931 First National Congress of Working and Peasant Women in Mexico City, leading one observer to describe her as "strong physically and intellectually. Of unsatisfied ambitions."⁵⁹ Despite her close personal and political ties to the PCM, however, her relationship to the party already showed signs of strain over questions of "superstructure." The writer Anita Brenner noted in 1926 that Michel "recognize[d] sex as the key to things" and dismissed her fellow PCM militant Elena Torres as having "the 'right' theory but no conception of practice."⁶⁰ After her participation in the October protests, the PCM published a "clarification" it had secured from her two months earlier, disavowing her cultural work with the Veracruz state government and pledging that she was "as always, ready to subject myself completely to the political line of the Party."⁶¹ By 1932, Michel had broken off her relationship with Laborde and decided to travel, with her seven-year-old son, Godo, to New York City.⁶² There, Michel continued to develop a broad and cosmopolitan circle of friends, drawing on her Communist Party contacts to secure work singing folksongs at the John Reed Club, the School of Social Sciences, and MoMA before taking her act to the Soviet Union, where she performed for women's groups and cultural centers in Moscow and Leningrad.⁶³

Whatever personal and political aspirations carried Michel to the Soviet Union, her experiences there marked a critical turning point in her relationship to revolutionary politics. She arrived to a warm welcome amid contacts from Kollontai and Rivera and spent just over a month in Leningrad, touring the city and its factories, cultural centers, and museums. "Since the day I arrived in Leningrad," she wrote to *New Masses* editor Joseph Freeman, "I have had doors opened to me to acquaint me with every type of activity developed in the USSR."⁶⁴ She traveled from Leningrad to Moscow, where she reconnected with Modotti and met with Kollontai and Zetkin. Nonetheless, she concluded during her visit that both the Soviet and Mexican governments had perverted and betrayed their respective revolutionary legacies because they severed their ties to the organic fabric of society.⁶⁵ In particular, as she would elaborate through her activism and writings over the following decades, an authentic revolution would place a premium on popular culture and on women's uncommodified labor, what Michel dubbed the "natural economy."

Upon returning to Mexico, Michel left the PCM, a decision she narrates as a definitive, revelatory moment. In 1984, Michel told an interviewer that she returned in 1934 from a two-year visit to the Soviet Union and confronted Laborde about the "woman question." He contended that patriarchy was part of the superstructure that would wither away with the destruction of capitalism, and she responded that women faced problems resulting from an artificial social organization, independent of politics and economics. "Then I said," she recalled, "since you are going to expel me for this, to save you the work here is my party card. And I tore it to pieces and left them there, and that's how I left the party."⁶⁶ Given the imbrication of her political and affective relations, however, breaking with her party comrades must have been wrenching. Apart from remaining close to Albina and Godo, her Communist comrades had become Michel's adoptive family; she had intended her journey to the Soviet Union to solidify those bonds rather than rupture them. Her break with the PCM, however, was neither as discrete nor definitive an event as the above anecdote implies.

In November 1933, the PCM newspaper published a lengthy notice that on 13 August—immediately after her return to Mexico—the secretariat of the Central Committee voted for Michel's expulsion.⁶⁷ Having been instructed to put herself at the disposal of Mexico City's regional committee, Michel responded with a letter explaining that she "does not agree with the fundamental points upon which the direction of the communist movement rests and therefore is not subject to the same forms of labor as before because she does not agree with the interpretation and directives that the directors of the communist movement have for the women's movement." With vague references to Michel's background (*antecedentes*), the notice ascribed her position to the "antimarxist conceptions on the role of the working woman in the revolutionary movement of capitalist and colonial countries." The Central Committee conceded that the Politburo would take up these questions at the opportune moment but that it "could not tolerate in the heart of the Party people who openly declare their disagreement with the program of the Communist International and who refuse to submit themselves to Party discipline."

Michel responded with the pamphlet *Marxistas y "marxistas,"* drawing parallels between the Mexican and Soviet revolutionary leadership for having "falsified the true direction that the revolution needs to triumph."⁶⁸ She argued that the "development of a collective culture" would require grounding in Mexico's own complex history and cultures, with their intricate layering of indigenous and Spanish cultures intersected by French and U.S. influences. The imposition of a revolutionary culture from Moscow or even from Mexico City would dampen, rather than inspire, revolutionary fervor among Mexican *campesinos* (peasants). She then devoted most of

the pamphlet to discussing what subsequent writers dubbed her peculiar feminist ideas.⁶⁹ The pamphlet gestured toward her later elaboration of the notion of the world's "duality," a complementarity in which men and women each played essential roles. She described a "natural economy" of reproduction and a "social economy" of subsistence or production as pertaining to women and men respectively. To Michel, the world of the home and family held a position at least as important as the world of agricultural and industrial production. Treating the natural economy as less important than the social economy was to capitulate to capitalist terms. Women, having an inherently closer connection to the natural economy, had a greater potential to subvert those terms and would therefore assume a pivotal role in any truly revolutionary movement. She rejected as "absurd" the party line that the "woman question" remained part of the superstructure, insisting "as long as [this imbalance between the natural and social economies] was not faced with theoretical exactitude, this fundamental error would continue to multiply."⁷⁰

Leaving the PCM, however, meant straining or even severing ties with people who had formed her entire social world before her departure for New York in 1932. Having developed an elaborate network of friends and contacts during her time abroad, her affective ties to the PCM might have seemed dispensable immediately upon her return. Laborde would have been distracted by his 1934 presidential bid, and she jumped immediately into a full schedule of performances and work with the Cultural Missions. By January 1935, however, she second-guessed her decision and wrote to her friend and confidant Joseph Freeman to ask his advice about petitioning to re-enter the PCM, but on her own terms. "I sent those pamphlets [*Marxistas y "marxistas"*] to the Mexican [Communist] Party with my petition for re-entry," she wrote,

since I refused to subject myself to their directives when I returned to the country, [the Party] declined to allow a discussion I proposed dealing with the woman question. Well, I have no more will to witness the revolutionary movement everywhere treating women like the bourgeoisie does. I know how to work in the revolution and have not stopped doing so since I arrived in this [country], and I have proposed to re-enter the Communist Party because it is necessary for the movement and to attack the dangerous farce that our so-called Marxist Government is developing here. I will continue to work as a rural teacher and will publish the book, more in relation with the Party, or in full relation.⁷¹

Freeman wrote back the following month encouraging her to re-enter the PCM. "It is important for you to work with the collective," he wrote, "and

not to buck big forces alone, an unarmed individual." The Central Committee rejected Michel's petition.

Michel's description four decades later of her experiences within the Communist Party echoed long-standing complaints of women in radical and revolutionary movements throughout modern history—a frustration that egalitarian claims appeared never to extend to women. "I joined [the PCM]," Michel recalled, "and I realized that the Communists used women the way the clergy did, to do errands, to take orders, to heat coffee, and furthermore they used many women for sexual diversion."⁷² While Communists hardly held a monopoly on using women for menial labor and "sexual diversion," and Michel's connection to Laborde apparently had afforded her protection from the advances that most women encountered, her politicization both inside and outside the party left her with little patience for such hypocrisies. She expressed regret at leaving the PCM, but her continuing commitment to the party's long-term goals "could not prevent [her] from seeing that while the discipline of the Party itself does not also include a line giving guarantees and support to women, not only the economic but all efforts, however triumphant they may appear, will be held in check, falling into all the contradictions inherent to capitalism."⁷³

Michel turned her organizing energies toward the gritty work of community activism around working-class and peasant women's issues, strengthening her ties to the postrevolutionary state. She used her position within the Cultural Missions program to mobilize *campesinas* to demand land and social services, although her Communist political formation continued to inform her activities. She chastised one mission leader in the southwestern state of Guerrero for failing to instill "scientific Marxist socialism," arguing that while Calles, Mexico's political puppeteer, may seem proletarian compared to her former paymaster *mister Roquefeler*, he still embodied the betrayal of the Mexican revolution.⁷⁴ From Michoacán, she petitioned for land for one community's women, requested the withdrawal of the local landowner's armed guards, and recommended that the Forestry Commission prevent the *hacendado* from any further destruction of the surrounding ash trees.⁷⁵ In nearby communities, she organized consumption and production cooperatives, always taking care to coordinate her efforts with her male counterparts' work within a structure of gender complementarity. "I have sought ways to interest the women directly in the efforts for their economic and cultural improvement," she explained, "without waiting for the situation of their husbands, fathers or brothers to improve. Prejudices make this difficult, but I also interest the men in the same way and make them understand the work, thus achieving, in the majority of cases, a good result."⁷⁶ While these issues may seem minor in

world historical terms, they were the substance of postrevolutionary rural organizing, the implementation of revolutionary promises in towns and villages throughout rural Mexico.

Michel's work as a rural organizer also gave her access to national politics, albeit always weaving together local efforts with the state-building project in Mexico City, allowing her to implement many of the ideas about gender and political economy that she would articulate most memorably in her 1938 book, *Dos Antagonismos Fundamentales* (*Two Fundamental Antagonisms*).⁷⁷ She helped reorganize the defunct Women's Revolutionary Institute, and by March 1938, Michel had assumed the post of Secretary for Women's Action within the Confederación Campesina Mexicana (Mexican Peasant Confederation) a position from which she advocated for women's political rights as well as for access to land and education, particularly for indigenous women.⁷⁸ Writing in a journal published by the reorganized ruling party, Michel explained that women's participation gave the revolution a "transcendental character" and echoed her earlier arguments that the "social organization of [women's] activities should be the consequence of that primordial difference [between the sexes], having nothing to do with all the false positions in which women artificially place themselves."⁷⁹

Even in 1938, at the peak of her involvement with federal policymaking, Michel's politics remained grounded in popular organizing. Her Confederación Campesina Mexicana colleague Josefa Vicens shared a room with Michel while attending a conference and returned to their room exhausted after a long day of meetings only to find Michel there with a group of prostitutes. "Concha wanted to know the prostitutes' problems," Vicens recalled, "which seemed fine to me, although that night truly was not for the prostitutes, it was for sleeping. But I stayed and chatted with them. Concha was a very strong woman."⁸⁰ She drew international attention in January 1936 when she unsuccessfully led a group of about 250 *campesinas* to invade one of Calles's estates, demanding its transformation into a women's training center because "the revolution had left rural women nothing but the deaths of their fathers, sons, *compañeros*, and brothers without giving them any benefit."⁸¹ While she negotiated with Calles, his armed guards rounded up the *campesinas* and herded them off the property.⁸² Although the effort failed—comically, according to the U.S. ambassador Josephus Daniels—it created enough of a spectacle to gain support from high-level policymakers.⁸³ By September 1937, President Lázaro Cárdenas's closest advisor, Francisco Múgica, sent Cárdenas a letter supporting the project, and Cárdenas offered Michel another *hacienda* to house the institute.⁸⁴ Like the convent-torching story, this anecdote became a staple of Michel's anecdotal repertoire, demonstrating not only her willingness to face danger and

challenge authority on behalf of rural women but also her early political alignment with Cárdenas—still a venerated political figure today—against the discredited Calles and exemplified how her apparent defeats resulted in victories.

Given Michel's sartorial politics, Vicens ironically described Michel as *bragada*, meaning not only strong but literally "wearing the pants." Other admirers used adjectives similarly at odds with Michel's commitment to gender conventions: brave, ambitious, husky-voiced, independent, tenacious, and warrior-like. The anecdotes that circulated, piecing together a life story meant for public consumption—by friends and family as well as allies and rivals—perhaps did more than, as Daniel James reminds us, depict "the way the world ought to be" in order to stave off life's "epistemological crises." To be sure, Michel's life experiences demanded some anecdotal heavy lifting to square her expectations with the reality of sexism within egalitarian movements and a widespread disregard for caring labors within a culture that venerated motherhood. These stories, however, also had the opposite effect, generating narrative fragmentation rather than coherence. In addition to fostering confusion about the timing and sequence of events, Michel's anecdotes allow her to inhabit multiple personae and to display the incongruous aspects of her life story. She told interviewers about singing for the Rockefellers in order to meet with Lenin's widow; she underscored her respectability and sexual modesty within the Communist Party and, in the same interview, described becoming a single mother by age fifteen; she insisted upon celebrating an "authentic" Mexican femininity and yet nothing in her life hewed to the gender conventions of her time and place.

By the time Michel narrated many of these tales to interviewers, she saw them through the prism of memory, a lifetime of activism and political upheaval, and a long writing and teaching career. Perhaps it was her intense contact with artists—modeling for Diego Rivera, Tina Modotti, and Leon Kroll—that convinced her of the importance of embodying her political convictions and locating herself as an embodied character within her anecdotes. In addition to highlighting her *tehuana* dress, she frequently mentioned her beauty or her physical stance as she challenged powerful men. These lively stories, populated with famous figures and brimming with animating details, not only reveal the tribulations and aspirations of a particular life, but also, and perhaps more importantly, serve as the founding parables for her political philosophy that sought to universalize an idealized indigeneity that valued subsistence labors and gender complementarity.

NOTES

¹Woody Allen plays the eponymous character of Leonard Zelig in his 1983 film, acting as a “human chameleon” who fits in among figures ranging from Charles Lindbergh to Susan Sontag.

Renowned contemporary artist Alfredo Zalce recalls attending parties in 1930s Mexico City where “Concha Michel sang and Diego Rivera opined”: James Oles, “Testigo de los años 30,” *Reforma*, 12 January 2000, 1. See, also, Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983); and Gabriela Cano and Verena Radkau, *Ganando espacios: Guadalupe Zúñiga, Alura Flores y Josefina Vicens, 1920–1940* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Iztapalapa, 1989), 112–13. Germán List, interview by author, 20 June 1996; and see interviews given by Guadalupe Rivera Marín in *Las dos Fridas*, directed and produced by Rodrigo Castaño (Mexico City: Canal Once, 2003). Please note that all translations are my own.

²On embodied performances and historical method, see Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Kathleen Canning, *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class, and Citizenship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

³Michel was added, along with Tina Modotti, as a character in a new production of a play about Kahlo’s life, “Cada quien su Frida,” *El Universal*, 15 July 2007. Julie Taymor unsuccessfully sought recordings of Michel for her 2002 movie *Frida*; Don Shewey, “Film; United in Their Love of the Outsider,” *New York Times*, 27 October 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/27/movies/film-united-in-their-love-of-the-outsider.html>.

⁴Michael Nelson Miller, *Red, White, and Green: The Maturing of Mexicanidad, 1940–1946* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1998), 157. Carlos Monsiváis, “Voy a dar un pormenor . . .,” *El Norte*, 9 January 2005; Cristina Civalé, “Frida Kahlo, recuperada por una mujer que la odió,” *Clarín*, 25 November 2005, <http://www.clarin.com/diario/2005/11/25/conexiones/t-01095705.htm>; and Armando Ponce, “Frida en su centenario y el Palacio de Bellas Artes,” *Proceso*, 2 July 2007.

⁵Michel joined the signatories of an open letter defending Modotti against the “scandal-mongering [newspaper] *Excelsior*”: Patricia Albers, *Shadows, Fire, Snow: The Life of Tina Modotti* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1999), 206. Letizia Argenterì, *Tina Modotti: Fra arte e rivoluzione* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2005), 204–5.

⁶Elena Poniatowska, “Concha Michel, figura clave de la cultura,” *Fem 7*, no. 25 (1982); and Poniatowska, *Tinísima* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1992), 629–30.

⁷Alfredo Cardona Peña, *La entrevista literaria y cultural* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Coordinación de Humanidades, Dirección General de Publicaciones, 1978), 339.

⁸Kurly Tlapoyawa, *We Will Rise: Rebuilding the Mexikah Nation* (Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2002), 113. One Aztlán group points to Michel’s rejection of western cosmologies: <http://www.mexika.org/Cosmology.html>. The Mexican musician Salvador Ocheda dedicated his 2006 album, *The Roses*, to Michel (“a famous singer, revolutionist, and feminist”) and Modotti (“a great photographer,

actress, and political radical"). Perhaps most bizarrely, a faux journal entry posted on the Marxism International Archive describes Michel's disillusionment with the Left while getting both the facts and the spirit of her life almost exactly wrong: see Louis R. Godena, "In the Land of Pepsicoatl a Revolution Is Deferred," *Marxism International Archive*, 30 October 1996, http://www.drifline.org/cgi-bin/archive/archive_msg.cgi?file=spoon-archives/marxism-international.archive/marxism-international_1996/96-11-03.020&msgnum=38&start=2956&end=3121.

⁹Juana Armanda Alegría, *Emancipación femenina en el subdesarrollo* (ca. 1974; repr., Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 1982); Rubí de María Gómez, "El feminismo cósmico de Concha Michel," *Fem* 21, no. 170 (1997): 8–15; and "Concepción 'Concha' Michel (feminista mexicana)," *Fem* 22, no. 187 (1998): 23. Michel's heteronormativity is curious, given not only her association with such women as Kahlo and the singer Chavela Vargas, whose sexual relations with women were an open secret, but also her own unconventional family life, which never included an enduring domestic relationship with a male partner.

¹⁰In addition to Elena Poniatowska's four-part 1977 interview with Michel (all but the last installment started on the front page of the newspaper *Novedades*), Mexican feminists regularly point to her as evidence of a particularly Mexican brand of feminism. See, for example, Rubí de María Gómez Campos, *El sentido de sí: Un ensayo sobre el feminismo y la filosofía de la cultura en México* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2004); "Concepción 'Concha' Michel"; Poniatowska, "Concha Michel, figura clave de la cultura"; Anilú Elías, "Dos que abrieron camino," *Fem* 8, no. 30 (1983): 41–43; Beth Kurti Miller, "Concha Michel: revolucionaria mexicana," *La Palabra y el hombre* no. 50 (1984): 21–25; Patricia Cardona, "Concha Michel," *Fem* 10, no. 42 (1985): 24–25; Angel Flores and Kate Flores, *The Defiant Muse: Hispanic Feminist Poems from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1986); and Gómez, "El feminismo cósmico."

¹¹Alegría, *Emancipación femenina*.

¹²*Ibid.*, 45.

¹³Magda Oranich, "¿Qué es el feminismo?" (Barcelona: Editorial La Gaya Ciencia, 1976), available in the private papers of Concha Michel, held by Citlali Rieder [Michel's granddaughter], Morelia, Michoacán, hereafter Michel Papers.

¹⁴Gómez Campos, *El sentido de sí*, 166–87.

¹⁵Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁶Elías, "Dos que abrieron camino," 43.

¹⁷On Michel's invasion of the Hacienda Santa Bárbara, see Jocelyn Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–2. On her plan to kill Rivera, see Salvador Novo, *La vida en México en el periodo presidencial de Miguel Alemán* (Mexico City: Empresas Editoriales, 1967), 299; and Elena Poniatowska, "La Michel, una Figura Clave de la Cultura," *Novedades*, 16 August 1977.

¹⁸Early interventions in feminist biography underscore the importance of diversifying the particulars out of which historians fashion more general narratives and of making gendered experience a central analytic of life stories. See, for example, Sara Alpern et al., eds., *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

¹⁹On the impossibility of ascribing transparent meanings to experiences, see Joan Wallach Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–97.

²⁰Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 16.

²¹*Ibid.*, 29.

²²Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," *The Monist* 4, no. 60 (1977): 453–71, as quoted in Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 187n37.

²³James, *Doña María's Story*, 172.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 215. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1475–90.

²⁵James, *Doña María's Story*, 183.

²⁶Alfredo Cardona Peña says that Michel entered the convent school at age seven and left after four years; he goes on to describe her leaving the convent at age sixteen. See Alfredo Cardona Peña, "Close Up—Concha Michel," 1947, reprinted in Cardona Peña, "Péfiles de México: Concha Michel," *El Día*, 29 April 1979.

²⁷Citlali Rieder, interview by author, 3 April 1996. See, also, Gómez Campos, *El sentido de sí*, 167. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints records indicate a Concepción Michel christened on 11 August 1894 in Venustiano Carranza, Jalisco, which is slightly east of Villa de Purificación: "The Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Family Search," database, <http://www.familysearch.org> (for Concepción Michel, limit to Mexico; accessed 15 May 2009).

²⁸Rieder interview.

²⁹"Concepción 'Concha' Michel."

³⁰Elena Poniatowska, "Concha Michel Abandonó los Escenarios Elitistas y se Refugió en el Folklore," *Novedades*, 14 August 1977.

³¹Cardona Peña, "Péfiles de México."

³²Poniatowska, "Concha Michel Abandonó." Michel belies this projection of naïveté later in the interview, when she notes that the nuns crossed themselves when they saw her coming and explains that after she set fire to the statue, "they bathed me in holy water; they nearly exorcised me."

³³Elías, "Dos que abrieron camino," 42. Several articles represent Michel as a revolutionary wielding her guitar as a weapon: Cardona Peña, "Pérfiles de México"; and Clive Smith, "Una artista guerrillera y un arte milenario," *El Sol de México* (Mexico City), 30 January 1966.

³⁴Elena Poniatowska, "Con su Guitarra por Compañía Recorrió más de Medio Mundo," *Novedades*, 15 August 1977.

³⁵Women in dire straights often left children in a *casa de cuna* (orphanages) temporarily, especially if they had live-in jobs as Michel did. Ann S. Blum, "Cleaning the Revolutionary Household: Domestic Servants and Public Welfare in Mexico City, 1900–1935," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 4 (2004): 67–90; and Blum, "Public Welfare and Child Circulation in Mexico City, 1877–1925," *Journal of Family History* 23, no. 3 (1998): 240–71.

³⁶Concha Michel, *Dios-principio es la pareja* (Mexico City: B. Costa-Amic, 1974), 207–11. None of the articles I have found published prior to *Dios-Principio* mentions the episode. One laudatory article from the ruling party's newspaper explains her work collecting and disseminating folk songs, "She continues speaking with naturalness, with energy, with the same love that a mother lavishes on her dying child. She knows that a child of the people is dying: the popular song, and that's why she expresses herself in this way: with tenderness to resuscitate it and with courage against its gravediggers" (*El Nacional*, 16 June 1949, 1). A 1947 article omits the episode entirely, saying only that at age sixteen she left the convent, stole one hundred fifty pesos from her home, and left for the United States (Cardona Peña, "Pérfiles de México"). As late as 1971, an article indicates that she left the conservatory and took up *corridos* because "they gave me a way to understand the people, to relate to them" and includes no mention of her first child (Sara González López, "Concha Michel: Espíritu Valiente y Tenaz," *Claridades*, 14–20 March 1971).

³⁷Poniatowska, "Con su Guitarra por Compañía."

³⁸Alegría, *Emancipación femenina*, 44.

³⁹See, in particular, Concha Michel, *Marxistas y "marxistas"* (Mexico City: publisher unknown 1934); Michel, *Dos antagonismos fundamentales* (Mexico City: Ediciones de la Izquierda de la Cámara de Diputados, 1938); Michel, *Dios Nuestra Señora* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1966); and Michel, *Dios-principio es la pareja*.

⁴⁰On Michel's participation in the Cultural Missions program, see Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, chap. 3. In the 1920s and '30s, the PCM had strong ties to the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) and to teachers' unions. For her collected songs, see Concha Michel, *Cantos indígenas de México* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, Biblioteca de Folklore Indígena, 1951).

⁴¹*Vecinos* of Tepetitla, Tlaxcala, to Jefe de Misiones Culturales, 1 January 1930, Michel Papers.

⁴²Director de la Escuela Normal de Jalapa, Veracruz, 18 June 1931, Michel Papers.

⁴³Poniatowska, "Concha Michel Abandonó."

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶I have been unable to resolve this chronological discrepancy. A 1928 portrait taken by Modotti (Margaret Hooks, *Tina Modotti: Photographer and Revolutionary* [London: Pandora, 1993], 96) shows her wearing a dark blouse with a small embroidered border along the bottom hem and a dark pleated skirt, akin to what one cultural historian has dubbed the "communist-nun style" of the era (Letizia Argentero, *Tina Modotti: Between Art and Revolution* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003], 103). An image from Michel's 1932 visit to Leningrad appears to show her in non-indigenous dress (clipping from Michel Papers). A 1932 charcoal drawing by Leon Kroll in New York shows her hair braided atop her head and large, dangling earrings, but what is visible of her blouse is not conspicuously indigenous (Acquisition no. 175.1940, MoMA Archives, New York City, NY). By 1949, an article in the Mexico City daily *El Nacional*, described her as "displaying beautiful garments, of the sort used by our *indias* of the southeast" and "femininely" pushing up the sleeve of her *huipil* (embroidered indigenous blouse): Alberto Morales Jiménez, article, *El Nacional*, 16 June 1949, 1.

⁴⁷Poniatowska, "Con su Guitarra por Compañía."

⁴⁸E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). On the China Poblana as a manufactured national icon, see Ricardo Pérez Montfort, "La china poblana como emblema nacional," *Artes de México* 66 (2003): 40–49; and Emma Yanes Rizo, "Cielo de lentejuelas: travesía por el traje de china poblana," *Artes de México* 66 (2003): 52–63.

⁴⁹Rick A. López, "The India Bonita Contest of 1921 and the Ethnicization of Mexican National Culture," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 2 (2002): 295.

⁵⁰Deborah Poole, "An Image of 'Our Indian': Type Photographs and Racial Sentiments in Oaxaca, 1920–1940," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 84, no. 1 (2004): 65.

⁵¹Ibid., 68.

⁵²On the U.S. fascination with Mexican folklore, see Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of All Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920–1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992).

⁵³Elena Poniatowska, "Concha Michel aún Conserva Gran Vitalidad Como Cuando se Enfrentó a Elías Calles," *Novedades*, 17 August 1977.

⁵⁴Alicia Azuela de la Cueva, *Arte y Poder: Renacimiento artístico y revolución social México 1910–1945* (Zamora, Mexico: El Colegio de Michoacán and Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005).

⁵⁵Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Campesinos and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 71.

⁵⁶Aurelio Tello, "El patrimonio musical de México. Una síntesis aproximativa," in *El patrimonio nacional de México*, ed. Enrique Florescano (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997), 91.

⁵⁷Mary K. Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis, *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); and Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

⁵⁸Agente 10 [José Ponce] to Departamento Confidencial de la Secretaría de Gobernación, 22 January 1930 Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales, caja 56, file 3, doc. 228, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, Mexico.

⁵⁹*El Nacional*, 10 October 1931, 8.

⁶⁰Susannah Joel Glusker and Anita Brenner, *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 66.

⁶¹*El Machete*, 20 October 1931, 2.

⁶²On breaking with Laborde before leaving for the United States, see Alegría, *Emancipación femenina*, 45. Her interviews imply that New York served simply as a stopping-off point to raise funds for her trip to the Soviet Union, but the documentary record indicates that the decision to travel to Eastern Europe occurred during her stay in New York. She secured her travel visas on 3 August 1932 at the Mexican consulate in New York City (see Michel Papers), and the PCM newspaper reported in her expulsion notice that she had traveled to the Soviet Union "by her own initiative and with the authorization of the CP of the US, the country in which she found herself" (*El Machete*, 10 November 1933, 2).

⁶³Michel recalls performing at MoMA before her trip to the Soviet Union, but the only extant program has her performance during her return trip. See Program, *American Sources of Modern Art*, Exhibition #29, 8 May–1 July 1933, MoMA Archives. The Rockefeller Archive Center (Sleepy Hollow, NY) has no record of the family's relationship with Michel.

⁶⁴Michel to Freeman, Joseph Freeman Collection, box 30, folder 29, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, hereafter HIA.

⁶⁵It is difficult to ascertain the exact dates of Michel's journey. She told one interviewer that she was in the Soviet Union for "only" two years (Alegría, *Emancipación femenina*, 45), but she was in New York City until at least 15 August 1932 ("Music Notes," *New York Times*, 14 August 1932, 23), was back in New York by July 1933, and returned to Mexico City in August 1933 (*El Machete*, 10 November 1933, 2).

⁶⁶Esperanza Tuñón Pablos, *Mujeres que se organizan: el Frente Unico Pro Derechos de la Mujer, 1935–1938* (Mexico City: Grupo Editorial Miguel Angel Porrúa, 1992), 66. Also recounted in Elías, “Dos que abrieron camino” and Alegría, *Emancipación femenina*.

⁶⁷*El Machete*, 10 November 1933, 2.

⁶⁸Michel, *Marxistas y “marxistas,”* 1.

⁶⁹Miller, “Concha Michel.”

⁷⁰Michel, *Marxistas y “marxistas,”* 32–33.

⁷¹Michel to Freeman, 20 January 1935, Joseph Freeman Collection, box 30, folder 29, HIA.

⁷²Poniatowska, “Concha Michel, figura clave de la cultura,” 34.

⁷³Michel, *Marxistas y “marxistas,”* 33.

⁷⁴Tito Huereca to Jefe del Departamento de Enseñanza Agrícola y Normal Rural, 27 December 1934, box 3242 / 353, file 2, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública, Mexico City, Mexico, hereafter AHSEP.

⁷⁵Michel to Jefe del Departamento de Enseñanza Agrícola y Normal Rural, 3 March 1934, box 3252 / 363, file 10, AHSEP.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*

⁷⁷Michel, *Dos antagonismos fundamentales*.

⁷⁸David Vela, *Orientación y recomendaciones del Primer Congreso Indigenista Interamericano* (Guatemala City: Publicaciones del Comité Organizador del IV Congreso Indigenista Interamericano, 1959), 175–77. J. H. Plenn, *Mexico Marches* (Indianapolis: Bobbs–Merrill Publishers, 1939), 254.

⁷⁹Concha Michel, “Revolución,” *Revolución* 1, no. 1 (1938): 44.

⁸⁰Cano and Radkau, *Ganando espacios*, 112–13.

⁸¹Alegría, *Emancipación femenina*, 45.

⁸²Araceli Nuri Torres and Delia Ortega de Dorfman, “Concha Michel Habla sobre la Dualidad,” *Despierta Mujer: Revista de Mujer Trabajando*, 4 March 1976; and Poniatowska, “Concha Michel aún Conserva.”

⁸³Daniels described the incident as “amusing but pathetic”; Daniels to Secretary of State, 28 January 1936, Record Group 59, Document 812.00 / 30334, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

⁸⁴Múgica to Cárdenas, 9 July 1937, Centro de Estudios de la Revolución Mexicana “Lázaro Cárdenas” (Jiquilpan, Michoacán), Fondo Francisco J. Múgica, Sección Volúmenes, Vol. 179, No. 60. See, also, Michel to Múgica, 12 July 1937, Michel Papers.