

INTRODUCTION

AVIATION, MYTHOLOGIZED

Successive technological revolutions have immeasurably widened the psychological gap between generations. With some reason, perhaps, the man of the age of electricity and of the airplane feels himself far removed from his ancestors. With less wisdom, he has been disposed to conclude that they have ceased to influence him.

—Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*

Now man, burgeoning with force and power, violates your heaven in a bird: the airplane.

—Jesús U. Ibarra, in Carlos Martínez Assad,
El laboratorio de la Revolución: El tabasco garridista

Marc Bloch, renowned French historian and a founder of the Annales school, cut to the heart of what has made aviation so beguiling for nations and their leaders: that by virtue of technology's immense symbolic power alone it provided a convincing illusion of progress. The achievement of human flight through mechanical innovation fulfilled such a profound and longstanding desire that it seemed to make self-evident the idea that scientific and technological prowess, more than any single attribute, defines civilization. The widespread acceptance of a technologically deterministic worldview—the belief that technology drives history—is inextricably linked to the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Technological de-

terminism gained popularity from the eighteenth century forward as a justification for Western colonialism and the supposed racial and cultural supremacy of white people.¹ This critically flawed assumption endures as a prominent feature of political discourse worldwide, despite scholars' repeated debunking, because it offers a simple justification for accepting uncritically power structures that prevail across much of the world today.

It is perhaps unsurprising, given the symbolic importance of aeronautics technology, that academic and popular authors alike frequently begin histories of aviation by invoking myths and legends that testify to humankind's well-chronicled fantasies of flying. The ancient Egyptians' reverence of birds, Greek figures such as Mercury and Icarus, and the Seraphim of Christian theology have provided writers with engaging, if well-worn, entryways for discussing aviation as a historical topic, although few really examine the cultural importance of such myths in shaping how people think about flight. Pushing forward into the European Renaissance, scholars cite Leonardo Da Vinci's ornithopter as the first serious foray into the theoretical mechanics of flight, followed by the advent of ballooning in the eighteenth century and George Cayley's conceptual prefiguring of the modern aircraft.² These stories conform neatly to the foundational narrative that emerged in Western historiography by the end of the nineteenth century, especially in the social sciences, which identified science and technology as both reason and justification for Western dominance.³

It should be equally unsurprising that in Mexico, a country where settler colonialism defined much of its historical trajectory, authors writing on national aviation incorporated elements of indigenous, pre-Columbian lore. They most frequently drew from the Aztecs' cosmology to form this alternative canon, beginning with Ehecatl, the wind deity, often associated with the feathered serpent god Quetzalcóatl, and Ehecatl's son, Tohtli, who transformed into a bird to escape the world's destruction in a firestorm and returned to lead the eagle warriors from the land of Anáhuac, the Nahuatl name for the Valley of Mexico, the center of the Aztec Empire. Invocations of the *Danza de los Voladores* (a Nahuatl ceremony wherein practitioners, swinging by their feet via a rope around a pole that can exceed thirty meters in height, act as messengers between earth and the heavens) likewise parallels invo-

cations in Western culture of humanity's desire to take flight. In popular histories of Mexican aviation, such as José Villela Gómez's *Breve historia de la aviación en México* and others, this mythological legacy either complements or substitutes references to Western symbolism.⁴ This affinity for Mesoamerican iconography follows the practice of aviation professionals and institutions in the country since the Mexican Revolution, as evidenced by Juan Guillermo Villasana's invention of the "Anáhuac" propeller.⁵ Given the attention paid to Indigenous symbolism, what is surprising is that most authors offer little in the way of exploring the meanings of these symbols in context with the technology's development in Mexico. Why were they so common? What did they mean to the pioneering figures in aviation who referenced them?

In this work I answer these questions, and others. I explore the cultural legacy of Mexican aviation by examining the development of the national aviation program alongside processes of national identity formation during the overlapping periods of revolutionary reconstruction (1921–1946) and the postwar era (1945–1960). I focus primarily on the years from 1928 to 1960, a particularly dynamic period that begins with the creation of the Department of Civil Aviation and finishes with a crisis in commercial aviation and the start of the space race. Such an analysis emphasizes reciprocities between culture, politics, and the expansion of the country's aviation industry, rather than portraying technology as history's singular causal force. Assumptions of linear progress guided elite development projects, but they were not unanimously accepted by everyday people, who sought to engage with the national aviation program on their own terms.

Technologically deterministic nation builders presented machines as material evidence that progress was inevitable and that the future would be a utopia. Technologies enabling human flight first gained significance as a symbol of modernity in Mexico during the nineteenth century, starting with Joaquín de la Cantolla y Rico's pioneering experiments with hot air balloons. His flights around Mexico City in the 1860s drew large crowds and his *globos de cantolla* (smaller, paper balloons) are still used in festivals today.⁶ Although the balloons held little practical use as a tool for national devel-

opment, the contraptions offered outward-looking liberal elites a means to mimic European hobbies that they conflated with cultural modernization.

Enchantment with ballooning also reflected how the country's leaders viewed industrialization: as a panacea for the economic and political problems that had foiled national unity and economic stability since independence. Humiliating foreign interventions, first at the hands of the United States (1846–1848) and later a French-led coalition (1861–1867), exacerbated these issues. Desperate politicians invested in machines as potential solutions. Starting in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Mexican leaders presented their successes at world's fairs with hopes of impressing foreign financiers whose money could be reinvested in industrial development. Mexico's leaders also hoped to dispel accusations of backwardness by presenting their nation as having undergone “civilizing” processes that made it more like Western Europe.⁷

Fascination with technological modernity at midcentury turned to obsession during the regime of Porfirio Díaz. The pace of industrialization increased, as did innovations in aeronautics, which took on new meanings as a symbol of capitalism and military might. In 1907, El Buen Tono tobacco company, one of the country's most advanced domestic industries, found a novel use for aviation. Representatives attached a banner advertising the company's product to an airship, which took off from the racetrack in the Mexico City neighborhood of Condesa and sailed around the capital, providing residents with a thrilling example of modernization while reminding them which tobacco brand they should buy.⁸

On the eve of the Revolution, pilots with the US-based company Moisant International Aviators observed Francisco I. Madero's rebel forces organizing near the Mexican–US border as they traveled to the capital to give a demonstration. They reported their discovery to President Díaz in what was, albeit unintentionally, one of the first acts of military surveillance by an airplane in world history. The incident inspired Díaz to order the purchase of several Moisant aircraft for the army, and the war ministry sent a small group of officers to train as pilots at the Moisant Aviation School in New York. Although Díaz fled into exile before these plans could come to fruition,⁹ his orders anticipated the importance of military aviation.

The onset of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 was the most nationally consequential event since Miguel Hidalgo's cry for independence a century before. Ignited by frustration at the lack of effective democracy and worsening class inequality under the dictatorship of Díaz, the Revolution upended established political, social, and cultural institutions. Leaders like Francisco "Pancho" Villa and Emiliano Zapata became global icons who inspired innumerable representations in film and literature. The rhetoric and achievements of the revolutionaries resonated globally and influenced the twentieth century's most memorable political and social movements, including revolutions in Russia, Guatemala, and Cuba.

Many of the Revolution's most important cultural contributions were produced during the era of national reconstruction, which began in 1920 and lasted into the 1930s. Intellectuals, artists, and government officials took advantage of new, mass communication technologies to reimagine the nation and disseminate their vision globally. The country's artists, particularly muralists and folk artists, received international acclaim for exalting everyday life and labor, and for exhibiting their works in public spaces so as to make them accessible to all social classes. National government support of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo*, highly racialized ideological movements that recentered national identity and citizenship on racial and cultural mixture between Western civilization and pre-Columbian Native American civilization, created a blueprint for a new national mythology that gained widespread support throughout Latin America.

Contemporaries praised *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* as racially progressive, but, more recently, scholars have argued persuasively that these ideologies breathed new life into settler colonialism by contributing to a process of erasure.¹⁰ In many respects, *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* were as much about replacing hardline white supremacist views of technological determinism with a softer version that convinced the world that Mexico was a country not of "backward Indians" but of mestizos, who inherited the "modernity gene" from their Spanish conquistador father while maintaining the mystic spiritualism of their Indigenous mother. Put another way, Indigenous people were celebrated only as part of the nation's

glorified past, but mestizos embodied its technologically advanced future.

The Revolution began with Madero's rebellion against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, but mass participation stemmed from a widespread desire for political, agrarian, and religious reform, greater social equality, and a rejection of foreign influences. Madero's betrayal by General Victoriano Huerta dashed hopes for a quick return to peace as well as the formation of a national government capable of addressing these issues. Even after Huerta fled Mexico, revolutionary factions battled one another for control over the country and for what they saw as the best way to implement the Revolution's demands. These demands included a wide range of contested issues, but generally included secularization, democratization, and land and labor reform. A new constitution, which officials ratified in 1917, provided the most comprehensive expression of these goals. It established a legal foundation for redefining basic citizenship rights, curtailing the power of the Catholic Church, asserting national control over the country's natural resources, establishing basic labor rights, and, perhaps most significantly of all, enacting sweeping land reform initiatives.

While delegates gathered in Querétaro to discuss the nation's future, the recently founded Escuela Nacional de Aviación published a magazine to generate interest in aviation among popular audiences. The publication, titled *Tohtli*, had a cover featuring an Aztec eagle warrior and a new model of aircraft for each issue. It provided readers with international and domestic aviation news, and included references to contemporary culture through the reoccurring column "Mexican Literature," which included stories, poems, and songs packed with allusions to aviation.¹¹ The magazine was one of the first examples of how the government used the expanding reach of mass media to excite everyday people about a distinctly nationalist aviation program. The juxtaposition of the country's glorified Indigenous past with its modern industrial advances followed a formula popular among federal officials for instilling a sense of patriotism that, when disseminated through the press, strengthened Mexico's imagined community.¹² The magazine thus

marked an expanded use for aviation as a tool for promoting a new national identity informed by the Revolution.

Mexico was not the only country that seized on aviation as an important measure of its modernization. Joseph Corn elaborated on the contemporary term “air-mindedness” to describe the quasi-religious faith in the transformative power of airplanes that flourished across industrialized and industrializing nations during the early twentieth century. International competitions provided aeronautics experts a chance to represent their country while attaining personal glory. This was true not only for wealthy and industrialized nations but for countries with modernizing ambitions that sought recognition of their technological accomplishments as well. Brazilians fiercely contested claims that the Wright brothers’ Kitty Hawk flight made the brothers and, by extension the United States, the “first in flight.” Rather, many in Brazil pointed to Alberto Santos-Dumont’s 1906 flight, which took place in public and did not rely on a guiderail to assist takeoff, as the true birth of aerodyne flight. Gilberto Freyre, one of the best-known intellectuals in Brazil and the world during the mid-twentieth century, postulated in his book *Order and Progress* that Santos-Dumont’s innovations held the potential to catapult Brazil past the United States and western European countries, in economic and technological terms. Indeed, the ideologies linking technological sophistication with white supremacy caused aviation to take on added importance in regions where the majority of the population was nonwhite. In Peru, elites saw “a Quechua-speaking pilot’s triumphant flight across the Andes” as a chance to present a modern image of the country “with roots in distant but tangible Andean history.”¹³

The use of aviation in World War I garnered worldwide attention. A generation of fighter pilots like Manfred von Richthofen (aka the Red Baron) and Lanoe Hawker attained celebrity-like prominence during the course of the war. Their deeds inspired stories that glorified battles for supremacy of European airspace, particularly the era’s aerial dogfights. But aerial warfare also contributed to anxieties about industrialization and what it meant for society. Santos-Dumont, the great Brazilian aviation pioneer, blamed himself for much of the carnage wrought by his “babies.” The guilt contributed to his years-long battle with depression. On

July 23, 1932, after hearing an airplane bomb a target in his home country, he succumbed to his feeling of immense personal culpability and took his own life.¹⁴

Russia, following in Mexico's footsteps, experienced a revolution that upended social order in the second decade of the twentieth century. Similarly, its leaders imbued aviation development with political and cultural meaning by affixing it to a narrative of revolutionary progress.¹⁵ In short, leaders of developing nations, especially during the first decades of the twentieth century, perceived aviation as having the potential to disrupt economic, political, and racial systems that shunted them to the global periphery.

Situating Mexico's aviation development within global context highlights the country's shared history with other nations, but Mexico's national heritage and the ongoing cultural and social transformations brought on by the Revolution shaped technological development in distinct ways. In both Mexico and Russia, political leaders imbued the technology with cultural and political meaning that became crucial to narratives of revolutionary progress. It also legitimized their respective governments and distinguished them from their ousted forebears. That said, the complexity of revolutionary-era Mexico's cultural and racial issues, particularly ideologies like *mestizaje* and *indigenismo*, which inspired movements to reimagine the nation and citizenship, uniquely influenced how people received and understood technological achievements. Aviation, the pinnacle of early and midcentury technological innovation, was filtered through cultural and racial lenses. Debates regarding cultural and racial identity were intense throughout the Americas, but the extent to which Mexico's revolution prompted a radical reconstruction set it apart. In this context, aviation and the figure of the aviator assumed special significance. Both airplane and pilot were essential to the reimagining of national identity and citizenship in the wake of the 1910 Revolution. As symbols, they helped national leaders reconcile inconsistencies between the Revolution's social goals and their own technocentric views of progress.

Technological progress reinforced revolutionaries' perceptions of science and rationality as antithetical to church influence in national affairs, which they sought to end. Historian Adrian Bantjes described Mexico during the cultural revolution as "a lab-

oratory of modernity, where the Enlightenment dream clashed with the alternative visions that stressed local culture and religiosity.¹⁶ Under the leadership of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR, National Revolutionary Party), government officials sought to replace religious teachings with explanations rooted in scientific thought. The Secretariat of Education under presidents Álvaro Obregón (1920–1924) and Plutarco Elías Calles (1924–1928) fixated on technological innovations in lesson plans. Officials also sought to replace religious festivals with secular holidays that celebrated inventors rather than saints. Garrido Canabal, famed anticlerical governor of Tabasco, flew in a red-and-black-painted airplane, because the colors were synonymous with his antichurch agenda. Tabasco newspapers printed poems such as “Al clero,” which provocatively invoked the airplane to demonstrate the power of science in hopes of goading the clergy.¹⁷ At every level, science and technology facilitated the secular transformation of citizens, which was a primary goal of PNR leaders.

After a decade of internecine warfare, revolutionary leaders devoted themselves to rebuilding the country and creating a transcendent, secular, and cultural identity. The country’s physical size and cultural diversity, to say nothing of the bloody political conflict of the preceding ten years, made this a difficult task. Crafting such an identity necessitated government investment in transportation, infrastructure, and mass media, and included officially sanctioned projects carried out by social scientists and other intellectuals that aimed to integrate the country’s diverse population into a new model of citizenship. The establishment of the country’s first commercial air routes closely followed the onset of reconstruction. On August 21, 1921, the *Compañía Mexicana de Transportes Aérea* inaugurated the country’s first commercial air concession, providing service to Mexico City, Tuxpan, Tampico, Laredo, Matamoros, Saltillo, Monterrey, and San Luis Potosí.¹⁸ Civil aviation expanded by fits and starts for the remainder of the decade, but officials trumpeted its potential as a means for overcoming geographic divisions that left some areas isolated from national life.

Presidents Obregón and Calles sought to implement standardization and professionalization of the country’s modest air force. They also deployed aircraft to help suppress challenges to their authority, which exposed dissatisfaction among some sectors of the

population that believed these administrations had failed to fulfill the promises of the Revolution. In these ways, aeronautics technology, in both its civil and military applications, came to represent the amplified power of the central government to direct the process of national unification.

The establishment of the Department of Civil Aviation under the *Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas* (SCOP, Secretariat of Communications and Public Works) in 1928 signaled the government's keen interest in developing aeronautics as a significant infrastructural, economic, and military technology. That same year, a visit from international celebrity-pilot Charles Lindbergh inspired leaders to capitalize on aviation, and the excitement it generated, to facilitate diplomacy. Daring aviators undertook highly publicized goodwill flights to achieve personal glory and national recognition. Such flights also recalled the unrealized goals of nineteenth-century liberals who participated in world's fairs, in that they sought to demonstrate the country's modernity to the international community and convince foreign investors that rebuilding the nation would ultimately pay dividends. A government-hosted *Semana Aérea* (Air Week) in Mexico City at the end of 1929 redoubled elites' efforts to earn national prestige, displayed a spirit of technological competitiveness, and showcased the country as a sound investment. The centrality of highly trained, often charismatic pilots to both these spectacles further presented officials with a new model for modern ideals of citizenship. These developments signaled the beginning of the modern civil aviation program, and they serve as the starting point for this analysis.

This book begins with the idea that industrialization entailed a profound process of cultural transformation inseparable from the changes it brought to the country's economic and political systems. Aviation development offered more than a pragmatic response to material conditions. It provided an effective symbol for promoting the aspirations of the new elite who attained prominence during the Revolution and who fixated on technology as a measure of national progress. The politicians, industrialists, and cultural tastemakers in the media who made up this group molded the aviator into an archetype of modern citizenship that promoted patriotic *mestizaje*

while also reflecting so-called modern values like individualism, cosmopolitanism, and technological proficiency. I argue that the figure of the pilot as a model citizen proved an adept vessel for propagating the values championed by the country's dominant political party and validated the technological determinism that underpinned its development philosophy.

This archetype was defined by a constellation of consistent attributes. It was a vigorous, masculine figure, whose nationalist virtue was tempered by a cosmopolitan sensibility. His service and sacrifice to the country licensed him to engage internationally without facing questions as to his patriotic loyalties. Above all, his mastery over a dangerous and spectacular cutting-edge technology made him uniquely capable of embodying national progress. Yet modernization schemes were subject to ever-changing political, economic, and social contexts. This caused leaders and everyday people to reimagine their country's future frequently. As people changed their perceptions of what the country's future should look like, the archetype of the aviator shifted to reflect the interests and values of whoever held power. Such transformations were visible in films, press coverage, and state-sponsored ceremonies and events. Examining these sources reveals that, although several attributes remained more or less constant, it is possible to identify four distinct incarnations of this archetype during the years from 1928 to 1960.

From 1928 to 1930, the aviator-archetype appeared in the national consciousness as a goodwill diplomat, military professional, and martyr to the cause of revolutionary progress. Three air force pilots undertook high-profile goodwill flights followed closely by government officials, newspapers, and, to some extent, the general population. Two of these endeavors, one piloted by Emilio Caranza and another by Pablo Sidar, ended in fatal crashes. In the aftermath of those tragedies, the widows and mothers of the newly dead led public displays of mourning. Such displays accentuated the masculine bravery and sacrifice that the nation required from its male citizens, and assigned passive roles for women that centered on their ability to act as conduits for the grief and pain caused by industrialization. Future incarnations of the archetype added variations to this model and stressed certain attributes over others, but this masculine, martyred hero remained the blueprint until at least 1945.

During Lázaro Cárdenas's presidency (1934–1940), the emphasis on military service softened and officials attributed greater weight to economic nationalism. Civil aviator Francisco Sarabia took over the role of the goodwill flyer. His goals represented the diplomatic priorities of the contemporary administration—namely, improving relations with the US government and international financiers, and rallying nations against the threat posed by international fascism. Sarabia's goodwill flight also ended in a fatal crash, reviving the symbolism of martyrdom. His status as an entrepreneur whose airline competed with foreign-backed companies fit neatly alongside efforts by the Cárdenas administration to exert greater national control over the economy. After Sarabia's death, his wife, Agripina Sarabia, while still taking a leading role in directing national grief, assumed control over her late husband's airline. It was not entirely uncommon for a wife to take control of a family business after the death of her husband, but doing so in what the public viewed as the male domain of commercial aviation, especially while under so much attention and scrutiny, defied expectations and complicated gendered narratives. Although much changed regarding the public image of the aviator during this period, significant continuities remained. Depictions of military aviators still prevailed on film, presenting the aviator as the modern ideal for masculine heterosexuality. His conquest of the female love interest paralleled the civilizing process driven by technological industrialization, and preserved the woman's role as a passive counterpart to the empowered male aviator.

In the 1940s, emphasis returned to military aviation as the country prepared for, then entered, World War II. Colonel Antonio Cárdenas Rodríguez continued Sarabia's diplomatic mission with a goodwill tour of Central and South America in support of hemispheric unity as a bulwark against the looming chaos caused by a massive global war. The tour took him to the capital of nearly every Latin American nation and replicated the route attempted by Sidar on his ill-fated 1930 goodwill flight, allowing Cárdenas to embellish the legacy of the Mexican aviator internationally. The public exposure he gained on the trip earned him a degree of celebrity that made him an ideal choice to command Escuadrón 201, the country's symbolically laden contribution to World War II. Film-makers reprised women's roles as passive figures, who honored the

memory of those who died while fighting to keep the country safe from fascist invasion.

The figure of the aviator underwent its most significant transformation during the postwar period, as dramatic changes to politics and the economy made commercial aviation not simply symbolic of, but essential to, government development strategies. Growth in the postwar civil aviation industry required the training and employment of ever more pilots, engineers, and mechanics, undercutting the aviator's image as a uniquely capable individual. Pilots, and aviation professionals in general, instead represented an idealized vision of the growing urban middle class. Directors of popular films such as *¡A volar joven!* and *Ando volando bajo* replaced an emphasis on disaster and personal sacrifice with happy endings of domestic stability that appealed to middle-class sensibilities. The aviator no longer appeared as a firm representative of the future during this period. The proliferation of aviation as part of daily life and the arrival of new technologies rendered the archetype obsolete.

Although developing aviation was mostly a top-down process, everyday people participated in shaping the symbolic meaning of the aviator. They did so by choosing to give attention to, or to ignore, the representations presented to them, and by deciding whether or not to attend functions that celebrated the aviator as a paragon of modern virtues. Popular audiences generally responded positively, but their interpretations sometimes varied dramatically from what authorities intended. Politicizing aviation was a double-edged sword that inspired protests and riots that threatened to upend government messages of unity. The perils and pitfalls of aviation development also soured public opinions on official modernization initiatives. The expansion of the country's aviation network often occurred at the expense of the poor, especially those in rural areas, leading these communities to resist new construction of infrastructure, like airstrips or airports, that endangered their livelihoods. In one instance, regional strongman Saturnino Cedillo drastically reimagined aviation as a tool for preserving his state's autonomy from the central government, constituting a near complete reversal of that technology's established symbolic meaning. Such incidents testify to the fact that while aviation captured the popular imagination, it did so in diverse and sometimes unexpected ways capable of confounding a linear view of progress.

This study provides the first monograph-length, scholarly analysis of aviation development in Mexico. It gives equal weight to the contextual factors in which technological change occurred as it does to the technology itself. This approach allows for a more critical treatment of the subject, revealing the assumptions about progress undergirding aviation's social importance, and provides insights into its relationship with political and cultural processes set in motion by the Revolution. Wherever possible, the narrative focuses on people's actions and choices as driving history, rather than portraying what happened in the past as the product of monolithic institutions or the inevitable consequence of scientific advances. This leads to a richer, more diverse, and ultimately, more accurate story about human interaction with technology.

Despite this work's focus on aviation, it is also the history of people who formed a new national identity in the wake of a cataclysmic revolution. As such, it contributes to a growing body of literature published by Latin American scholars who examine technological topics from social, cultural, and political perspectives.¹⁹ Although this study provides a cultural and political analysis of Mexican aviation technologies, history of technology scholars prove helpful in striking a balance between socially deterministic and technologically deterministic extremes. Thomas Hughes's concept of technological momentum, the idea that technology is initially highly susceptible to outside influences but functions more as a causal factor as it becomes ensconced in society, proved particularly important in demonstrating the development of aviation in conjunction with cultural, political, and economic factors. Social theorists and philosophers of technology also influenced how I think about aviation in broader contexts, albeit implicitly.²⁰ This is especially true as it applies to Mexican aviation from the latter half of the 1940s onward, when tourism and commercial aviation became central to the regime's economic development strategy.

Despite increased interest in the historical intersections between culture and technology in Latin America in recent years, the literature on aviation in Mexico remains limited. The field is predominantly populated with hagiographic company histories and works written by enthusiasts concerned primarily with the

minutiae of mechanical design. This is not to disparage popular historians. On the contrary, I am deeply indebted to such works, as the immense data contained between their covers allowed me to familiarize myself with the details of the topic. They provided facts that, together with my archival research, laid the foundation for my analysis. But although the labor of passionate and precise researchers such as Manuel Ruíz Romero lit the way in many respects, this study brings a much-needed interpretive approach to the topic. Willie Hiatt's examination of Peruvian aviation and Lars Denicke's analysis of aviation and modernity in Brasília demonstrate the value of this approach.²¹ Hiatt's monograph in particular illustrates the valuable insights that scholars can gain from examining the relationship between aviation and national identity. Currently, few studies have attempted to accomplish similar goals for Mexico. I address this gap in my study.

I employ methods anchored in a critical analysis of government reports, periodicals, ephemera (including advertisements and other promotional materials), and archival and feature films in my analysis of aviation and national identity formation. At times, I borrow from film theory to better evaluate how directors and producers helped transform airplanes into simulacra of progress aimed at popular audiences, and the aviator as a model for modern citizenship. This entails breaking down filmic elements including dialogue, *mise-en-scène*, and cinematography. Such interdisciplinary approaches complement the study's firm grounding in historical method.

This study moves chronologically through early and mid-twentieth-century Mexico, guided by the major national political developments that unfolded during the era. The first chapter offers historical background for readers who are unfamiliar with the Mexican Revolution and offers observations about the earliest stages of aviation development. It also explores the international context in which aviation developed and arrived in Latin America, beginning with Alberto Santos-Dumont, before exploring connections between Mexican aviation pioneer Alberto Braniff and Francisco Madero, the apostle of the Revolution. It highlights how the armed conflict established the military as the primary state-building institution in the country and explores how that affected aeronautics technology.

In chapters 2 and 3, I examine aviation development within the context of national reconstruction, focusing on the *Maximato*, the period from 1928 to 1934 during which former president Plutarco Elías Calles was rumored to have unduly influenced national politics. Chapter 2 covers the establishment of the Department of Civil Aviation and lays some groundwork as to the cultural significance of aviation by looking at *Semana Aérea* celebrations. It also explains how global factors, such as the onset of the Great Depression, limited growth in the budding aviation sector. Chapter 3 explains how government officials, industrialists, and members of the media transformed goodwill aviators into archetypes of modern citizenship during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Chapter 4 examines aviation during the *sexenio* (six-year presidential term) of Lázaro Cárdenas. Many people, especially on the political left, saw Cárdenas's government as coming the closest to enacting the social goals associated with the Revolution. This chapter reveals changes to the aviator archetype that reflected the administration's determination to exercise national control over the economy and protect its policy victories from domestic opposition and the threats posed by the outbreak of World War II.

Chapter 5 unfolds against the backdrop of the Ávila Camacho administration (1940–1946), which contemporary observers saw as a period of political moderation and centrism, but which historians have also recognized as important in laying the foundation for a shift to the political right after the war. It demonstrates how the country's entry into World War II once again called for revisions to the aviator archetype and allowed the national aviation program to overcome material constraints that had limited its practicality.

Chapter 6 examines aviation during the so-called Mexican Miracle, an era known for its more conservative politics and rapid, though unequal, economic growth. I show how aviation became an essential part of the government's postwar economic strategy, based on a revised version of the import-substitution-industrialization (ISI) model and an increasing reliance on tourism. The ensuing expansion of commercial aviation paralleled the growth of the urban middle class, of which aviation professionals were exemplary members. As aviation professionals multiplied and aviation became a feature of everyday life, the symbolic importance of aviation as a cutting-edge technology diminished. A financial crisis

that struck the country's largest airline in 1957 tarnished the image of commercial aviation as a key to sustained national economic growth, and highlighted flaws in the government's technocentric, tourist-driven development model. The beginning of the space race set a new frontier for aeronautics technology, which effectively extinguished the symbolic power of aviation and the aviator as representations of national progress.

The conclusion reflects on recent developments in national aviation and synthesizes the major findings. It further testifies to aviation's continued significance as an essential part of the government's efforts to pursue technological and economic modernization today.