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Projecting Mexico to the world: updating hybridity in *Diablero* (2018–2020)

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ABSTRACT

The depiction of national identities in Netflix Originals has garnered significant attention due to the streaming giant's expansion into non-English-speaking markets and the production of *glocal* and transnational content. While these productions often integrate national themes and cultures, they tend to avoid addressing complex contemporary issues, leading to a limited portrayal of the nations featured. This partial representation can result in a reductive understanding of the depicted nation's culture and society. The article examines how hybridity permeates the narratives and characters in the Mexican series *Diablero*, projecting notions of a desirable contemporary Mexicanness that embraces both pre-Hispanic and European ancestries while being distinctly global. By analysing Netflix's strategies in Latin America and the concept of hybridity, the article explores how *Diablero* depicts the coexistence of European and pre-Hispanic cultures whilst presenting hybrid identities as a desirable quality in contemporary Mexico. The analysis posits that although the portrayal of Mexico's society and hybridity is rather utopian in its tension-free configuration, its framing within the speculative fiction genre allows the portrayals to be read as ideal constructions and possibilities for new conceptualisations of Mexicanness.

KEYWORDS

Diablero; Netflix; García Canclini; hybridity; Mexico; transnational

Introduction

The depiction of national identities in Netflix Originals has garnered significant attention in recent years. This interest has been fuelled by the streaming giant's expansion into non-English-speaking markets as well as the *glocal* and transnational content produced in these markets. Although they often integrate the producing country's national themes and cultures into its storytelling, Netflix (International) Originals avoid addressing the more complex realities or contemporary issues of the nations it features. Combining local elements with popular genres and global themes, the content resonates with international audiences by being both relatable and refreshingly unique. Straubhaar et al. (2021) note that in Latin America, the emphasis on themes attractive to global audiences impacts on how the nations are portrayed. This is also a point made by Pagone (2020) on Spain, who

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concludes that although Netflix's global strategy has been to tell 'great stories from all over the world to people all over the world' (Netflix.com 2016), in this approach important national dialogues are diminished, resulting in a limited portrayal of the nation's reality. This partial representation leads global audiences to a reductive understanding of the depicted nation's culture and society, as claimed by Han, Yong Jin, and Yoon (2024) when exploring how Koreanness is constructed for non-Korean audiences. For the authors, Netflix's 'desire for local authenticity overlooks the decoding process involved in reception', that is, the need for local knowledge to accept, negotiate or reject the message represented on screen. Instead, argue the authors, all representations of Koreanness are understood by these global audiences as an authentic and realistic portrayal of Korea, perpetuating potentially problematic understandings of the country. It is, thus, important to consider how Netflix Originals portray the cultures and societies of the countries it depicts through its local productions, since these are accepted as realistic portrayals of said country.

When it comes to Mexico, similar concerns arise about the portrayal of national identities and cultures. Zavala (2019) indicates that Netflix has the potential to give space to independent filmmakers, yet this space becomes a timid venue for social criticism. In contrast, Llamas-Rodríguez (2023, 227) affirms that Netflix's distance from established 'corporate media power houses in Mexico' like TV Azteca or Televisa, 'has allowed its producers to address more explicitly specific historical events'. It is worth noting in this regard that these contrasting views might be explained by the increase in Mexican Netflix Original productions and national subscribers since 2019, when Zavala's work was published. Scholars like G. Gómez and Franco (2020) raise concerns over ethical issues around representation, in particular on the topic of building sympathy towards narcotraffickers. However, for Cornelio-Marí (2020) the incorporation of local tropes allows a local 'ironic spectator', that is, one who can recognise these themes to enhance the enjoyment of the series with specific local knowledge that global audiences might miss. On Mexican identity, M. T. G. Martínez and Moya (2022) analyse *Sense8* to conclude that notions of *mestizaje* (racial mixing) still concede more value to Mexico's European heritage, whilst Llamas-Rodríguez (2023, 243) analyses two recent Mexican Netflix Originals to state similar concerns and add that the incorporation of Indigenous themes 'whether at the level of character, setting, or narrative, does nothing to boost the inclusion of Indigenous voices'. Instead, continues the author, 'the twenty-first century content offered by Netflix Mexico ends up reiterating the nation- building ideas of the twentieth century'. Whilst this is true of the series analysed by these scholars, this article argues that the series (2018–2020) imagines the nation through a lens of a hybrid identity that reasserts the value of Indigenous cultures. In the process, the storytelling rewards characters who embrace this hybrid identity and punishes those who reject any part of it. The article suggests that while the series may not accurately reflect the current power dynamics in Mexican society, the genre enables it to envision new possibilities and serve as a model for contemporary societies.

The article examines how hybridity permeates the narratives and characters in *Diablero*, projecting notions of a desirable contemporary Mexicanness that simultaneously embraces pre-Hispanic and European ancestries while being distinctly global. To understand the context in which the series was released, I first discuss Netflix's incursion into Latin America and the recent changes in the streaming media landscape

in Mexico. To support the analysis, I then contextualize notions of *mestizaje* and 'hybridity' to convey its centrality to discourses of Mexicanness, despite the contradictions and problems they create. In exploring how hybridity is constructed in the series, I analyse how it depicts the coexistence of European and pre-Hispanic cultures, before turning thereafter to the portrayal of hybrid identities. I suggest that the series presents hybrid identities as a desirable quality in contemporary Mexico, promoting conviviality when Indigenous and European cultures are embraced. To support this statement, I examine how the series rewards characters who embody an uncomplicated hybrid identity while punishing those who reject either of its parts.

Netflix in Latin America

After successfully pioneering a new business model of digital streaming, Netflix began producing its own content in the second decade of the 21st century. Under the banner of Netflix Originals, the company offers exclusive content. However, this exclusivity does not necessarily mean that all content is fully developed in-house. Instead, the term encompasses content that Netflix has commissioned, content produced elsewhere but with exclusive distribution rights for Netflix, content that combines traditional distribution in national channels with international distribution through Netflix, content that it has partly funded, and what Cuelenaere (2024) calls 'recycled content'. This 'recycled content' continues local productions through new seasons, sequels, prequels, and spin-offs of popular media products that originally were not Netflix productions. With its expansion into international markets since the mid-2010s, Netflix has had to consider how to attract audiences beyond the US. In addition to meeting various market requirements that mandate streaming companies to include a percentage of national content, the production of national Netflix Originals has also been a way to attract these new national audiences to the platform with familiar themes, language and actors (Castro and Cascajosa Virino 2020; Lobato 2019; Lotz 2022).

This approach of building on already-made content to expand their production in that country mitigated concerns about cultural imperialism. The processes of globalisation near the turn of the millennium had favoured an increase in the flow of media products from the US to international markets, leading to resistance towards and fear of what was perceived as Americanisation. While the expansion and influence of processes and products from the US were not limited to cultural products, Saskia Sassen (1996, 20) also affirms that 'the most widely recognized instance of Americanization is seen, of course, in the profound influence U.S. popular culture exerts on global culture'. Netflix began its international expansion into markets that had already implemented measures to protect national production in cinema and television. For instance, Brazil enacted two laws allowing citizens and businesses to invest part of their income tax into national films and encouraging partnerships between independent producers and foreign distributors (G. Martínez 2008). Similar measures are in place in other Latin American countries, such as Mexico and Peru, for example. While these actions are not enough to ensure that national productions can compete with US ones, the measures are indicative of a desire to protect national content. As a consequence, Netflix has adopted strategies to avoid being perceived as another tool in this media imperialism, such as producing or distributing content made by the country in which it was expanding.

Nevertheless, when Netflix started to expand into Latin America during the 2010s, it encountered several barriers. Firstly, the infrastructure for streaming was limited and affected by a digital divide (Smith 2019; Straubhaar et al. 2019, 235). Secondly, the cost of subscriptions and the forms of payment were not always affordable or viable in some countries or sectors of society. Thirdly, although many of these markets were accustomed to US content (García Leiva, Albornoz, and Gómez 2021, 4; R. Gómez and Muñoz Larroa 2023), audience data indicates that in some countries, such as Mexico, viewers initially favoured content on national television when Netflix first entered the market (Straubhaar et al. 2019, 241). However, recent data confirms that Netflix subscribers in some of these countries are now overtaking figures for viewership of paid national television (Straubhaar et al., 2019, 244), particularly in Brazil, Mexico and Argentina (García Leiva, Albornoz, and Gómez 2021, 5). In 2019, Vázquez linked Netflix's profit growth in the Mexican market to the rise in internet access, despite its patchy quality in many regional areas. Muñoz Larroa (2019, 88) also noted that at the time, only half of the households had internet at home. A few years later, R. Gómez and Muñoz Larroa (2023) affirmed that Mexico is one of Netflix's largest markets globally in terms of subscriber numbers, with an increase of 1.4 million between 2018 and 2020. Bárcenas Curtis (2023) underlined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the rise of Netflix subscribers in Mexico, asserting that this period changed media consumption habits and consolidated Netflix's position in the market. Indeed, subscriber numbers have continued to grow, with Guttmann (2024) reporting that Netflix had 8.8 million subscribers in the second quarter of 2023. All these authors emphasize that the production and distribution of local content is a key strategy for growth. Upon entering the international market, Netflix was able to 'identify trends that help it understand what kind of programming current and potential Netflix subscribers in international markets might want' (Lobato, 2019, 115).

In Mexico, Netflix formed alliances with established companies (R. Gómez and Muñoz Larroa 2023), such as with Izzy Telecom of Televisa, a major Mexican communication and broadcasting company established across Latin America, which included Netflix in its packages and allowed Netflix to stream part of its catalogue to other Latin American countries. By analysing audience preferences, Netflix can create, produce, license, and distribute content that attracts new subscribers. For example, *Club de Cuervos/Club of Crows* (2015–2019), produced with Mexican partners, was a strategic release in Mexico. This was followed by *La Casa de las Flores/The House of Flowers* (2018–2021), which was fully produced in the country. These productions exemplify Netflix's glocalisation strategies, combining global appeal with local themes that are relatable to other cultures and nations. For insights into the transnationalisation of Netflix's content, readers might refer to R. Gómez and Muñoz Larroa (2023), who explore Netflix's strategies in Mexico, and García Leiva, Albornoz, and Gómez (2021), who examine the broader Latin American market.

Mexico, Netflix and Diablero

In 2018, Netflix presented *La Casa de las Flores*, released *Roma*, and announced *Diablero*, all three productions labelled as Netflix Originals. These productions blend traditional Mexican cultural heritage with a renewal of aesthetics, genre, and storytelling. Paul Julian Smith (2019, 196) notes that *La Casa de las Flores* recasts an 'innovative heritage

telenovela for the streaming era', combining traditional elements of classic telenovelas with transgressive aspects of newer telenovelas, resulting in a mediatic success. This strategy of anchoring the narrative to a familiar mode was also employed in *Club de Cuervos*, which Mareike Jenner (2018, 227) describes as 'a parody of telenovelas' that 'addresses a Mexican national audience by drawing on the national media history and a transnational audience familiar with Mexican exports'. This aim to engage national viewers while also attracting international audiences is a common factor in new streaming media productions for international markets. Productions such as *Roma* and those mentioned above have become, for R. Gómez and Muñoz Larroa (2023), clear examples of a transnational strategy to increase subscribers in Mexico and gain global recognition. This strategy also seeks to challenge the dominance of Hollywood distribution, an area that Smith (2019) indicates has been problematic due to the limited time allowed in theatres before the content becomes available to stream.

Although the most popular Mexican genres like telenovelas and melodrama are most prevalent in Mexican (and Latin American) Netflix productions (Schmidt 2022), some speculative fiction series appeared in more recent times within Latin American Netflix Originals. Speculative fiction includes narratives that depart from reality and include elements such as fantasy, magic, the paranormal, different timelines, or science fiction, for example. While the term is under debate (Oziewicz 2017), when used as an umbrella 'supergenre', it facilitates the comparative analysis of imagined societies, regardless of whether such constructions are viewed as potential realities, such as in Atwood and Cameron's description (2019), or not. This category would encompass Netflix Originals such as the Colombian series *Frontera Verde/Green Frontier* (2019) and *Siempre bruja/Always a Witch* (2019–2020); the Brazilian series *3%* (2016–2020), *Onisciente/Omniscient* (2020), *Cidade Invisível/The Invisible City* (2021–2023), and *Ninguém Tá Olhando/Nobody is looking* (2019), or the Mexican *Diablero* (2018–2020) and *El elegido/The Chosen One* (2023). Seeing similarities between these series despite the differences of the fantasy, paranormal or science fiction genres within which they are articulated, I consider Nichols's (2010) work on genre and the potential of science fiction to explore the concerns, rules, and hopes of society through the formulaic structure, expanding these possibilities to these other modes of storytelling. Similarly, Grant (2007, 4–5) affirms that 'whether they are set in the past or in the future, on the mean streets of contemporary New York or long ago in a galaxy far away, genre movies are always about the time and place in which they are made', a premise also relevant to television storytelling. Despite the potential for imagined worlds to address contemporary tensions, conflicts, and debates present in society, many of these series have not been explored in depth, and academic works on *Diablero* are limited and generally focused on other areas. Pardo Fernández (2021) explores its transmedia universe. Petridis (2021) discusses narrative structure and plot points in a comparative analysis of thirteen horror Netflix Originals. Lynch and Albarrán-Torres (2024) approach production strategies across three successful Netflix Originals of speculative fiction (which the authors name 'telefantasy'), noting how the use of local folklore, myths and themes is usually a crucial element in this success. Finally, Cole (2025) discusses one of its main characters through the lens of the detective thriller genre to explore the changes derived from the adaptation from novel to screen. To date, this is the first piece of work dedicated to exploring how the series portrays Mexican identity.

Diablero is based on the novel *El diablo me obligó* (2012) by F.G. Haghenbeck, although the overall story is also influenced by the work of Edgar Clement, particularly his comic *Operación Bolívar* (1994). Jiménez Nava (2021) notes that both authors appear in the series in minor roles. Although inspired by Haghenbeck's novel, the series quickly departs from its characters and plot. Priest Ramiro Ventura (Christopher von Uckermann) attends the deathbed of a former girlfriend, who reveals to him they have a daughter, Mariana (Cassandra Iturralde), who has been kidnapped. A hospital nurse, Enriqueta 'Keta' Infante (Fátima Molina), discovers a symbol burned on the woman's skin and recognises it as identical to her also missing son's birthmark. Hoping the cases are connected, Keta sends Ventura to her brother Heliodoro 'Elvis' Infante (Horacio García Rojas), a professional 'Diablero' (demon hunter). They enlist the help of Nancy (Giselle Kuri), a young woman who can be possessed by demons at will. Isaac 'el Indio' (Humberto Busto), a *diablero* with several underground businesses and a former love interest of Keta, starts as an antagonist but soon joins their ranks. In the first season, the villains are Cardinal Morelos (Flavio Medina), the leader of a secret society within the Catholic Church called The Cónclave, and Mamá Chabela (Dolores Heredia), a *diablera* who wants to bring a new dawn of the world through apocalypse. The second season introduces Lupe (Ela Velden) as a *diablera* ally, Mayakén (Mathias del Castillo) as Keta's son, and new characters Alejandro (Michel Duval) and Altamirano (Hoze Meléndez) join The Cónclave as antagonists.

The series belongs to the genre of supernatural speculative fiction, employing themes of good versus evil, magical artefacts, liminal worlds of demons and angels, and an imminent end of the world that only the protagonists can prevent. It offers international audiences a range of structures, character types, and themes that are familiar and conventional while it also incorporates specific elements of Mexican culture, history or identity.

Hybridity, mestizaje and Diablero

The analysis discusses notions of hybridity as an expression of Mexican identity and highlights how *Diablero* illustrates ideal (and perhaps utopian) versions of this hybridity by attaching success or failure to the characters, depending on whether they exhibit a tension-free hybridity or they personify internal struggle. I am concerned with unveiling how Mexican identity is portrayed in the series and examining the role of hybridity in resolving key plot points. Before I turn to the analysis, this section briefly explores the concepts of *mestizaje* and hybridity regarding to the construction of Mexican identity.

After independence (1821) and later again in post-Revolutionary Mexico (1920-), the nation firmly articulated a national identity around Mexicanness that was anchored in notions of *mestizaje* that mixed pre-Hispanic ancestry with European heritage. Cornell and Hartmann (2006, 4) declare that 'since its founding, Mexico has proudly proclaimed its multiracial heritage, which mixes Indian and Spanish blood and cultures'. For Mijangos Díaz and López Torres (2011), the governments during and after the Mexican Revolution sought to integrate the Indigenous communities through acculturation and racial mixing, embracing a notion of *mestizaje* that combined European and pre-Hispanic Indigenous cultures that, however, were disassociated their contemporary Indigenous communities.

Mestizaje in Mexico was not merely the arbitrary result of racial mixing but was also a deliberate national project supported by eugenics. During the early 20th century, Mexican intellectuals and policymakers, such as Vasconcelos [1925] 1957, promoted *mestizaje* as a means to create a unified national identity. Vasconcelos' concept of 'La Raza Cósmica' (The Cosmic Race) envisioned a superior, mixed race that would emerge from the blending of different racial groups (Dikötter 1998). This ideology was intertwined with eugenic principles, which aimed to improve the population by encouraging the mixing of Indigenous and European bloodlines, particularly that of Indigenous women and mestizo men (Sánchez-Rivera 2021, 180). Vasconcelos' proposal included the education of the population in one language (Spanish), one geography, one national history, and the philosophical texts of Europe (Sámano Rentería 2004, 144). The Mexican government endorsed these ideas, integrating them into educational and social policies to shape the nation's identity and development. Indeed, as Stern (1999, 370) states, 'eugenics in Mexico must be understood within this panorama of state-building and national redesign'. In this process, the Mexican government formulated the need to 'incorporate the Indian into civilization', which meant 'to de-Indianize' and 'to do away with primitive culture, uproot regional dialects, traditions, customs, even the profound emotions of the man who is attached to his land' (Rosemblatt 2018, 135).

As the influence of eugenics waned in Mexico in the 1940s-50s, 'the cult of the mestizo was superseded by a growing interest in ethnic and anthropological difference' (Stern 1999, 371). Sámano Rentería (2004) indicates that it was in this period that the government established programmes to integrate the Indigenous communities into the formal economies by creating farming schools for Indigenous communities, the Instituto de Alfabetización para Indígenas Monolingües (Institute for Literacy for Monolingual Indigenous People), or the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (National Indigenous Institute), among others. These initiatives had 'an explicitly antiracist, aspirational program of development and national integration, arguably the last great project of social engineering undertaken by a Mexico's postrevolutionary government' (Lewis 2018, 265). Nevertheless, 'mestizo nationalist discourse thus left no space within which Indigenous peoples might advance their own understandings of ethnic and national identities' (Taylor 2005, 80).

The eugenics practices of the 1920s and 1930s had constructed an idea of mestizo focused on the racial mixing of European and Indigenous lineages, creating a Mexican identity that 'erased bodies that fell outside mestizaje (i.e. Black Mexicans)' (Sánchez-Rivera 2021, 180). For Moreno Figueroa (2010, 399), *mestizaje* in Mexico nowadays 'operates as a complex form of whiteness, that is, as a normative privileged location of identity that is normalized and ambiguous'. Moreno Figueroa notes how by colluding the idea of *mestizaje* with Mexicanness, the racial connotations of the concept were blurred in favour of political ones, making it stand in contrast to an *other* that is generally Indigenous or Afro-Mexican (2010, 399):

> Nevertheless, while mestizaje offers the possibility of flexible inclusion, it also allows an everyday experience of racism that continues to privilege processes of whitening alongside notions of whiteness and uses the national discourse, such as a 'Mexican' identity, to cover up and render invisible processes of discrimination and social exclusion.

Mestizaje is, thus, closely intertwined with the concept of biological racial mixing. It is for this reason that García Canclini (1990) makes a case instead for the term 'hybridity' to examine the cultural combinations that occur in Mexico. Given that the analysis is not focused on race but on cultures, this article takes this same approach. García Canclini (1990, 1997) discusses hybridity as a process where hegemonic and subaltern cultures are entangled in ways that make it difficult to discern the pure forms of each one, and refers (2013) to his early fieldwork in Mexico to express his sudden awareness of the way that hybridity was producing new expressions of cultures. García Canclini's conceptualisation of hybridity is, however, different from that of Bhabha (1994). Whilst Bhabha explores tensions in the postcolonial identity, for García Canclini, hybridity involves coexistence and syncretism, where these tensions are often eroded if not ignored. In particular, what fascinated García Canclini (1997, 111), as well as the syncretism, was the mixing of the low and high-brow cultures, the traditional and the modern, the local folk traditions with the mass media and new technologies, the advent of fusion music, the way that very local ethnic traditions travelled across borders to be showcased to different communities, or how tourism was also allowing urban societies to witness and participate in local festivals or traditions. The kind of hybridity explored by García Canclini is expressed through a combination of identities, languages and cultures that, however, do not supersede each other and instead co-exist in harmony. Similar to Gilroy's notions of 'conviviality' (2004) in its tension-free conceptualization, multiple cultures and ethnicities co-live and share the same local neighbourhood spaces. For Gilroy, conviviality evokes notions of 'living together' instead of a simple 'living next to' other cultures, which he instead identifies with 'multiculturalism'. García Canclini (1990) notion of hybridity connects to this idea with a kind of coexistence that is sustained by the acceptance of cultures and ethnicities that form the fabric of the Mexican nation. It is the result of centuries of co-existence, where the cultures of Europe and the cultures of the pre-Hispanic world create a new identity. In this sense, García Canclini's original conceptualisation of hybridity escapes the tensions of post-colonial theory. This theoretical position is rather utopian, overlooking the pervasive inequality affecting Indigenous communities. In this article, its application is shaped by the portrayal of hybridity in *Diablero*, which similarly adopts a positive, egalitarian, and utopian lens in its depictions. *Diablero* embraces this notion of hybridity through different elements of the narrative, expressing in this manner a Mexican identity that blends pre-Hispanic elements, European customs, and even Chicano identity. Not only do these cultures coexist and produce hybrid forms, but they are also often presented as variations of a common experience, different realisations in a multifaceted reality that can be approached through different cultural systems of knowledge. In this way, the series reduces potential tensions and hierarchies between cultures and their systems of knowledge, addressing them as variations and translations of a common reality. The discussion focuses on how *Diablero* integrates portrayals of hybridity that construct notions of Mexicanness across two main areas: 1) the coexistence of European and pre-Hispanic cultures and 2) the resulting hybrid identities.

'Encounter of two worlds'. Coexistence of cultures

The re-articulation of the colonial invasion as an episode from which a new society emerges is a recurring theme across Spain and Latin America. Often, this idea is framed

as a cultural encounter, glossing over the violent realities of colonisation. In the Netflix series, this notion of encounter frequently permeates the storytelling, portraying a world where cultures meet, overlap and interact. However, as the narrative unfolds, characters are either punished or rewarded based on their acceptance or rejection of both cultures. This cultural convergence is reflected not only in the locations and architectures depicted in the series but also through the deliberate manipulation of genre conventions. What initially appears to be a supernatural thriller following the conventions of US media, it quickly reveals itself to be influenced by the popular elements of Mexican melodrama and comedy.

The opening of *Diablero* presents the audience with an establishing shot of a large city at night, where a skyscraper stands out against the darkness with its pattern of lights, evoking notions of modernity, a global city, and a contemporary timeline. As a crane shot transitions to an apartment block, sirens wail in the background, someone cleans a car, and a woman tucks a girl in bed. These visuals suggest that this could be any city. The opening sequence facilitates global audiences to become familiar with the setting and themes of the story and, since the dialogue can be automatically dubbed on Netflix, the Mexican Spanish dialogues that follow become optional.

In this first scene, the girl laments leaving an iPad off her birthday wishlist because of the cost, making the conversation relatable to audiences independently of location. A nearby globe is turned to show the Americas at its centre. When the mother leaves the bedroom, the editing evokes familiar supernatural horror elements: flickering lights, glimpses of menacing figures, monstrous bodies with inhuman postures, dangerous characters moving with sudden jerky motions, creaking doors, the girl quickly hiding in the wardrobe and fast-paced loud breathing. By incorporating these common tropes and conventions, the series builds familiarity to draw audiences in. As the series reveals that the menacing figure is a demon, it continues to play with conventions in its characterization, such as long, claw-like fingers, bat-like wings, sharp teeth, and blacked-out eyeballs. After the demon kidnaps the young girl, a short version of the opening credits begins, introducing themes and iconography that position the series and depict a range of cultures in Mexico. It is only after establishing the genre within wider global traditions that the series hints at its unique point.

In these scenes, the audience meets one of the main characters, Elvis, who introduces himself as a 'diablero profesional' (professional demon-hunter) and welcomes viewers to Mexico City, home to 25 million people, he notes. The camera follows Elvis through bustling streets filled with music, parks, squares, Indigenous street festivals, children playing in a nearby water fountain, grand classical statues, colonial-period buildings with distinctive European styles, and an on-street performance by Café Tacvba[1] providing the soundtrack. From the outset, the location blends a global city with a range of local cultures connected to European and pre-Hispanic histories. The establishing shots of the city and the variations in the opening credits showcase this mixture of styles, cultures, and histories throughout. La Plaza de la Constitución or Zócalo (Constitution Square) prominently features in the story and credits, symbolizing this cultural blending with its 14th-century pre-Hispanic Templo Mayor (Main Temple), 16th-century buildings like the Catedral Metropolitana (Metropolitan Cathedral), the Palacio Nacional (National Palace), the Antiguo Palacio del Ayuntamiento (old Town Hall), the Portal de los Mercaderes (Old Portal of Mercaderes), and the 17th-century Edificio de Gobierno de

la Ciudad de México (City of Mexico's Governmental Building). Shortly after, the credits take viewers to the monument to Benito Juárez, the first Indigenous President of Mexico, who appears alongside symbolic representations of nation and law. However, this monument is not fully depicted and its significance is not revealed for audiences not familiar with it, as it is reinterpreted by depicting its back, which makes the statue appear as an angel. Although for international viewers these buildings might simply evoke historical architecture with European styles, for local viewers, this combination of styles intertwines religious, political, and trading histories from Europe, Mexico and pre-Hispanic Civilizations. As the story progresses, the construction of hybrid spaces remains central to the narrative. For example, in the first season, the place of power used by antagonist Mamá Chabela is an Aztec temple buried beneath Ventura's Catholic church, while the final battle of the season takes place in the aptly named Plaza de las Tres Culturas (Square of the Three Cultures). This blend of pre-Hispanic, colonial, and post-revolutionary spaces visually constructs a Mexico with a rich history where these cultures coexist in harmony and are respected as integral parts of history, as they all appear restored and seamlessly integrated into everyday life.

It is not only the mix of architectural styles and historical buildings that creates a connection between cultures. The portrayal of beliefs and other cultural expressions also reflects this blend, often overlapping. For example, towards the end of season 1, the priest Ventura compares the Christian apocalypse's four horsemen to the souls Mamá Chabela is invoking with the Aztec ritual. Similarly, at the start of season 2, the audience learns that Ventura is trapped in limbo. Despite being a Catholic priest, this space between worlds is identified as Apaohuaia, the first of the nine regions of the Mexican afterlife, Mictlán. When trying to find the demon who kidnapped Mariana and later when opening a portal to rescue Ventura, the characters draw a pentagram, an ancient symbol with origins in Mesopotamia and Greece associated with Wiccan symbology. When they finally find the priest, he is walking on the shores as if on water, dressed in plain robes and with long hair, echoing traditional depictions of Catholic male saints and other religious figures (Figure 1). On the slow boat that travels the first stage of Mictlán, the companions sing 'La Sandunga', a popular mourning song that combines traditional sounds from central Spain and Mexico. Indeed, music often brings notions of hybridity by combining local and international artists, blending different music genres and influences through a variety of bands on the curated list. This list includes musicians whose work is inherently hybrid, such as the abovementioned Café Tacvba or Huichol Musical, who explore sounds, themes, and languages from Mexican Indigenous communities with those considered mestizo. Through the evoked belief systems, visuals, and sound, *Diablero* consolidates hybrid spaces and cultures that encompass all Mexicans, regardless of their faith and cultural practices.

Further connections are made between notions of a contemporary and global Mexico and the pre-Hispanic world, creating transnational meanings in the process. Used by different characters on several occasions, the audience is shown brief clips from video-games, one of which is a ball game between characters in a pre-Hispanic setting (Figure 2), and a second one of a street fighting game, Tzompantli, which shows Leonel Arkángel, an Archangel hunter who fights 'La Santa Muerte' (The Holy Death) (Figure 3), which is also the main character of *Operación Bolívar*. The use of modern technology to sustain a hybrid culture, as depicted through these computers, echoes

Figure 1. Diablero. Season 2, episode 1. Ventura in limbo/Mictlán.

Figure 2. Diablero. Videogame. Season 1, episode 3. 1v1 ball game.

García Canclini's reflections (1990, 112) on how hybrid cultures pervade despite the advance of global modernity and the apparent threat of homogenisation.

Hybrid identities and the dissolution of tensions

Notions of hybridity derived from cultural elements are present from the very start of the series and extend beyond a binary system of pre-Hispanic and European cultures, establishing transnational links. When Café Tacvba performs the soundtrack in the opening credits, the band members are dressed in costumes resembling an Indigenous warrior with a headpiece, a Baron Samedi figure, and a demon-like character with red and black makeup reminiscent of a popular villain from the *Star Wars* universe. This eclectic mix of visuals accompanies Elvis as he walks through the city, explaining the world to the audience. Sitting in a boy's shoeshine stall, a medium close-up includes

Figure 3. Diablero. Season 2, episode 2. Tzompantli videogame. Leonel Arkángel and La Santa Muerte.

Figure 4. Diablero. Season 1 episode 1. Elvis and San Martín Caballero.

a picture pinned to the backrest, visually linking it with Elvis (Figure 4). The picture depicts the well-known Christian figure of San Martín Caballero (Saint Martin of Tours, Saint Martin the Knight), a warrior saint of Hungarian origin who began in the Roman army and ended up as bishop of France. Popular among shopkeepers in Mexico, the Saint evokes notions of luck and charity, while also reflecting characteristics such as warrior and helper of strangers, which define Elvis. Throughout the series, Christian and pre-Hispanic belief systems are intertwined, with characters battling demons from both cultures, chanting incantations and prayers in Nahuatl, Spanish, and Latin, meeting angels, and embodying Aztec deities. These belief systems are not separated but amalgamated into hybrid identities. In the series, this form of hybridity is presented as harmonious, whereas hybridity that results in internal tensions is depicted as a corrupting element that needs to be resolved or inevitably leads to tragedy.

A harmonious hybridity is also expressed through characters' names. While some of these are based on the book that inspired the series, numerous other elements distance

the series from the book and infuse hybridity into a nuanced Mexican identity. In the book, Elvis Infante is a Chicano ex-marine in Los Angeles, whereas in the series, he is a Mexican fighting in the capital city. His name embodies hybridity by combining Elvis and Pedro Infante (the Mexican singer), but also by the allusion that Elvis is a nickname derived from Heliodoro, the Greek classical author, as told by his father. Thus, Elvis represents a hybrid identity, with European, Mexican and US influences. In contrast, the character of Mamá Chabela presents a split identity where cultural coexistence is impossible. The series reveals via flashback that Mamá Chabela was once a Catholic nun named Isabel. After threatening to expose a priest as the father of her unborn child, he assaults her, leaving her injured. The Xanates, a secret and dangerous group of Diablera women, rescue, rename, and mentor her. Led by revenge, Mamá Chabela's goal becomes the destruction of the Church and the world that sustains it, bringing renewal through destruction. The identities of 'Isabel' and 'Mamá Chabela' are presented as opposites, representing different belief systems. Her clothes, the spaces she inhabits,

Figure 5. Diablero. Season 1, episode 6. Isabel telling priest she is pregnant.

Figure 6. Diablero. Season 1, episode 8. Mamá Chabela performing the ritual.

the language she prays in, and the iconographies of her world all differ (Figures 5 and 6). This dichotomy is presented as a rupture, a broken identity in conflict, leading only to violence – a flawed hybridity that corrupts the soul and ends in tragedy. This trope recurs in season 2 with the character of Tepoz, who undergoes a traumatic transformation, abandoning his Nahuatl name for 'Alejandro'. Tepoz, once Elvis' apprentice and friend, is possessed by the Ahuitzol, a mythical Aztec creature that lures victims to their deaths. Presumed dead, he is left behind by a young Elvis and rescued by the Cónclave, who manipulates him with promises of freedom from the creature. In exchange, he kidnaps Keta's son Mayakén, a hybrid child born of immaculate conception, both an angel and a reincarnation of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of War and the Sun. Both antagonists are victims of traumatic events, one under a Catholic priest, one under an Aztec demon. They are both rescued by power-hungry, secret and dangerous groups seeking to change the world through destruction, one the Xanates, the other the Cónclave. They are both manipulated to believe they will survive the rituals performed by or on them, for which they both undergo transformations that leave their former selves behind, symbolized by their name changes, among other elements. However, they both meet violent ends as a result of their actions, metaphorically suggesting that their split identities and their rejection of one part of their hybrid identity makes them flawed individuals in this world.

This flawed hybridity contrasts with a hybrid identity characterized by an uncomplicated acceptance of elements from different cultures. The series creates a world where convivial hybridity adds value, while flawed hybridity leads to conflict. These themes are embedded in the character design and storytelling. For example, character names often reflect hybridity, as seen with Elvis. His choice of car, a 'lowrider' or customized Chevrolet popular in Chicano culture, is nicknamed 'perro' (hound), and decorated with the image of Cerberus, the three-headed hound from Greek mythology. This juxtaposition of elements reinforces Elvis's cultural hybridity, further emphasized by his use of both Nahuatl and Spanish, and his appearance, which combines a modern burgundy leather jacket with tattooed Aztec symbols.

Other characters' names also evoke tradition and classical roots while suggesting modernity and layered identities. For instance, Elvis's sister, Enriqueta, has a now uncommon traditional Spanish name, shortened to 'Keta', a more modern version that Elvis sometimes expands to 'Ketamina', reflecting her profession as a nurse and healer. Isaac, with a centuries-old classic name, is sometimes referred to as 'el Indio' (the Indian), a problematic pejorative term that Elvis uses to irate him. His daughters, Paulina and Thalia, share names with popular Mexican stars of European and Mexican ancestry, a reference that is made explicit when they have to sing one of their songs to save their father. The shopkeeper of Korean ancestry, Son Hee, is nicknamed Martita by Elvis, an affectionate diminutive of Marta that expresses belonging and Mexican identity, which she also confirms through dialogue, as she speaks perfect Mexican Spanish and is upset about leaving Mexico behind for her father's Korean village during the apocalypse. Incidentally, Son Hee is one of the characters who plays the Aztec football video game.

These characters embody an idealised Mexican identity that is enriched by elements from different cultures, without tension. Their cultural knowledge aids them in their pursuits and ultimately saves them. Keta works as a nurse but also creates potions and spells as a 'santera' and healer, understanding both modern and traditional medicines. Keta and Elvis perform spells in Spanish, Nahuatl, and Latin, adapting their approach

based on the entity they are dealing with. In season 2, Keta takes the main character role to appear as a powerful reincarnation of the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, the mother of all gods, while Elvis cheats death and reincarnates as an Aztec man during the Spanish conquest, a cliffhanger not developed due to the series' cancellation during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Nancy can host demons on demand, becoming an important skill to find Mariana and survive Mamá Chabela's attack, and Father Ramiro Ventura is bonded to one of the last angels, a connection crucial to saving the world and rescuing him from the underworld.

For these characters, multilayered identities are key to their survival and successful plot resolutions. Characters who embrace and respect the languages and heritages of different cultures are rewarded with renewal, survival, and camaraderie. Those who reject hybridity or experience it as a conflict between two identities are punished with tragic endings. The series rewards characters who value and integrate different cultural elements. Even characters initially positioned at one extreme, like Father Ramiro Ventura, who starts depicted exclusively as a Catholic priest, are soon shaped to incorporate other elements and understanding of other faiths, reaffirming different parts of their identity as coexisting and not in conflict.

In *Diablero*, hybridity arises not only from incorporating and embracing different systems and cultures but also from accepting these as various interpretations of a complex reality. This hybridity begins with the conceptualization of culture and society, rather than the individual practices that form part of their lived experience. Hybridity is made possible through the recognition of all these cultural systems as valid and part of a broader cultural framework that integrates them all. The characters inhabit a hybrid world and, by not problematizing this circumstance, they succeed in the narrative and evolve. The series thus creates a world where European, Aztec, Chicano and other hybrid cultural elements coexist as part of a complex cultural system and Mexican identity. This understanding of Mexicanness shapes the post-Revolutionary emphasis on a Mexican *mestizo* identity, which in the series is not limited to an Indigenous-Spanish ancestry, as seen with Son Hee. This approach echoes García Canclini's (1999) discussion on the absence of hyphenated identities in Latin America, which he attributes to the understanding of *mestizo* as an enriching hybrid and positive identity that blends ancestries, ethnicities, and cultures to create a new one.

Conclusion

Although not all possible examples could have been included, Mexicanness in the series is prominently expressed through traditions, iconographies, cultures, and heritages derived not only from pre-Hispanic and European societies. Instead, it also encompasses other *mestizo* identities, including Chicano and Korean, coexisting within individuals without tension. In this way, the series formulates an idealised version of contemporary Mexicanness with a cosmopolitan approach.

Diablero is fundamentally a Mexico-Spain co-production that aims to reach global audiences through themes familiar enough for international viewers to enjoy without much explanation, yet distinctive enough to be eminently Mexican for local audiences. As a flagship series intended to move Mexican Netflix Originals beyond the popular genres of comedy and melodrama, *Diablero* was designed to attract Latin

American and Spanish audiences by incorporating established tropes of supernatural horror, while integrating mythologies and iconographies connected to Mexicanness. The global themes of the fight between good and evil, personal sacrifice for love, motherhood, and the protection of children enable familiar storytelling for global audiences. These themes are accentuated by national elements of hybridity that resolve tensions and allude to conviviality, respect, and adaptability as ideal and desirable modern values. In this way, cultural dichotomies and racial power dynamics are disrupted. The speculative fiction genre allows the series to divert from portrayals anchored on authenticity and reality to imagine a Mexican society where many contemporary issues have been (or are being) resolved, such as power dynamics between racial groups. Those who embody hybridity are rewarded, while those who hinder it are punished within the story. The series projects a kind of Mexicanness that is not only a product of blending pre-Hispanic and European heritages, but also updates this identity by positioning *mestizaje* within a global context of migration and diaspora, allowing for other configurations. Overall, the series reasserts notions of hybridity at the core of Mexicanness while softly redefining it for contemporary audiences.

Note

1. The spelling is deliberately with a 'V' after the band changed the typography to avoid legal issues with the coffee shop from which they got the inspiration for the name.

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