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After the Mexican Miracle:
Writers reworking national character tropes in contemporary Mexico City

by

Alberto William Sanchez

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

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in

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Laura Nader, Chair

Professor Paul Rabinow

Professor Beatriz Manz

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Writers reworking national character tropes in contemporary Mexico City

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by Alberto William Sanchez

Abstract

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Alberto William Sanchez

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Laura Nader, Chair

A new generation of writers in Mexico City are not playing the role of national intellectuals as previous generations of writers did. Between the 1930s and 1970s, writers worked to create and circulate Mexican national character tropes. Since the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, writers continue to use these tropes, however, they do so in ways that no longer reference the nation as a whole or evoke a better future for Mexicans.

My method of research included multiple and extended interviews with over thirty writers over a period of a year and a half, beginning in January 2005. All the writers I worked with were acquainted with each other, and were part of a larger network of writers that numbered over a hundred. Their work has been published in five principle magazines and cultural supplements. In my interviews with them, observations of their social interactions, and readings of their work, I have focused on how they conceive of their role as intellectuals, their work practices, and the ways that they appropriate and reformulate the national tropes as defined by the literature on Mexican national character.

I identified two principle modes of contemporary writing in Mexico City. The first is related to the literary genre “dirty realism”. It focuses on chronicling violence and depravity without justification or judgment. Since this mode has been criticized for its failure to take a political stance, I attempt to demonstrate how it arises given the political developments in Mexico since the 1960s. I argue that the best way to understand the conditions for this mode of writing is through the failure of developmentalism to fulfill the expectations for modernity that it helped generate.

The second mode is a more celebratory one. It is an upbeat consumer oriented writing that I study as it appears in urban lifestyle magazines. Both the dirty realist and the upbeat consumer copy is possible because the government no longer controls and censors intellectuals as it did in the 1960s and 1970s. Since the 1980s, to write cynically about Mexico, and to celebrate in writing the increasing possibilities for personal consumption, are both expressions of a relative autonomy from the state that did not exist previously. This independence from state control and the obligation placed upon intellectuals to reproduce a national ideology has been achieved

through a shift of terrain from the state to the market. Both dirty realism and upbeat urban lifestyles magazine copy respond to the demands of niche markets.

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Prologue

In May 1952, my advisor Laura Nader submitted a thesis entitled *A Brief Study of Caudillismo in Mexico*. It is divided into two parts. In the first, Nader reviews the literature on Mexican national character. In the second, she turns to novels of the Mexican Revolution. Her purpose was to present a profile of the Mexican leader, including a description of his propensity to violence, ambition, and the slavish loyalty he demands from his subordinates. She concludes her study by declaring that Mexicans have realized how important it is to transform this form of leadership: “intellectuals are moving the country forward toward harmony between the community and the individual.” It is in this harmony, she suggests that “liberty with stability” is to be found.¹

Her vision of a harmonious Mexico echoes the official slogan at the time—Progress with Stability. On one hand, there was a policy of national economic development that succeeded in providing between 2 and 3% growth in GDP without the political unrest and violence that had been common in Mexico before the 1930s. On the other hand, thanks to the Mexican Revolution, the single-party state had succeeded in elaborating a national discourse that was more inclusive and progressive than that in any other in Latin America country.² But in invoking “liberty”, and by analyzing the heavy-handed and personalistic form of leadership known as *caudillismo*, Nader’s thesis can also be read as a critique of the authoritarianism of the single-party state, even at the height of what is known as the “Mexican Miracle”.

At no other time in its history has Mexico experienced a period of political stability and sustained economic growth as that which occurred from the 1940s to the 1970s. However, more than political and economic, the “miracle” was cultural. As the capital of the country and its largest and most industrialized city, Mexico City was also the center of film, radio, television, and theater production. Most importantly for this project, it was the principle hub of literary activity and publishing. The Mexican Miracle was a brief period of relative synchrony between the bureaucrats who implemented the national development policies of the state, the intellectuals who legitimized those projects through a discourse of national unity, and the population who were buoyed by the expectation of modernization.

For a variety of factors this synchrony was broken, not least of which was the exhaustion of the economic model and the increasing insubordination of students and workers. If Nader’s thesis can be read as an early warning to the state to avoid violence and repression against critical sectors of the population, there were others. In 1950, Octavio Paz analyzed the history of authoritarianism in Mexico, tracing it back to the Aztecs and the Spanish conquistadors.³ Since his father was intimately involved with the revolutionary insurgents in the south, he must have had first hand experience with the *caudillismo* that Nader studied. At any rate, both of these authors call for transcending the personalistic and authoritarian style of governing.

I narrates these events in more detail in the chapters below. What I want to do here is draw a methodological parallel between Nader’s thesis and my own, as well as use it to put into relief the particular contribution that I am making. As with Nader, I work between national character studies and novels. For example, she refers extensively to *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*

1 Nader, “Un breve estudio sobre el caudillismo en México,” 42.

2 Florencia Mallon makes this point by comparing Mexico with Peru, see Mallon, *Peasant and nation*.

3 Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*.

by Samuel Ramos.⁴ So do I. If anything, I update her review of the national character literature by drawing on more recent works she did not have access to. Moreover, she turned to fiction of the Mexican Revolution. I turned to fiction published over the past ten years, belonging to the genre “dirty realism”, as well as to the upbeat consumerist copy of urban lifestyle magazines.

The contrast that I want to draw between Nader’s thesis and my own, which highlights the contribution that I am making, is the following: it was still possible for her to project a harmonious national future. That is, it was still possible in the 1950s to be optimistic about the collective future of Mexico. It no longer is. I need to make this clear, this is not my assertion. The claim that it is no longer possible to be optimistic about the direction that Mexico is going while living in the capital is one that is made by innumerable writers in one form or another, some of whom I cite below. This then is the problem motivating this research—From the 1930s to the 1960s most writers projected and imagined a harmonious national future, and since the mid 1990s most writers do not.

It is not difficult to demonstrate that the national character that is put forward by Ramos, Paz, or any number of other authors in the tradition, defines “a character” only negatively. For Ramos the sense of worthlessness that Mexicans feel arises because they do not yet constitute a full fledged national group, comparable to Europeans or residents of the United States.⁵ For Paz, similarly, Mexicans wore masks in order to hide the profound solitude that they felt as people on the margins of modernity.⁶ For the whole group of writers contributing to the tradition of Mexican national character studies, Mexicans are a group only to the extent that they have their underdeveloped and marginal national subjectivity in common.

In contemporary works on Mexicans, writers continue to invoke these national tropes with one significant difference. They no longer do so to project a possible harmonious national future. The Mexican Miracle with its import substitution industrialization policies came to an end without fulfilling the widespread expectations of modernity that it had help feed. Furthermore, neoliberal models of national development have not done better. It is not that development does not work, but that it is no longer possible to believe that all Mexicans will benefit nor that it can be still a basis for national unity.

Both the dark and pessimistic tones of “dirty realism” and the upbeat tone of urban lifestyle magazines respond to this situation. If people no longer believe in a bright collective future with which they can imbue the misery of the present with meaning, then a brave writer can still embrace the present by chronicling it in all its apparent collective hopelessness. Moreover, the failure of the collective project to fulfill expectations liberates the individual. If it is nearly impossible to imagine a better future for all Mexicans, it is possible to at least imagine living a better life as a consumer in Mexico City.

4 Ramos, *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México*.

5 See especially the chapter “Psychoanalysis of the Mexican” in Ibid., 50-65.

6 See especially the chapters “Mexican Masks” and “The Dialectic of Solitude” in Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*, 32-50, 211-234.

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As all projects of this nature, it would have been impossible to have completed it without the help of innumerable others who have given generously of their time and resources. In particular, I want to thank my advisor Laura Nader, who has mentored me in the discipline and has admonished me whenever I have strayed. I also thank the other members of my dissertation committee, Paul Rabinow and Beatriz Manz for their support. The President's Council at the University of California at Berkeley provided the majority of research funding. My parents also, have not only been unwavering in their moral support but have in moments of need given me the material support that has allowed me to finish what I had started.

With respect to my colleagues, I would mention particularly Tarik Elhaik, Tobias Rees, and Jerome Whittington. They are my allies. It is with them that I first tried out or learned most of the ideas that I have developed here. Tarik Elhaik was also present in Mexico City at the same time that I did my research and it was he that introduced me to Ari Volovich and Rogelio Villarreal, two writers central to my research. With regard to the writing of my dissertation, it would have been impossible without the editing, critical comments, and encouragement of Nina Kholi-Laven and Carol Berger. Of all the people to whom I am indebted in Mexico, I want to mention especially Ari Volovich, Rogelio Villarreal, Ozam Yehya, Norma Lazo, Alejandro Páez, and Juan Manuel Servín.

Finally, I mention my eternal gratefulness to Annelyne Roussel. It is she that has born the brunt of all the sacrifices that have gone into this dissertation. And it with her that I now wish to enjoy the benefits of having finished it.

Chapter I: Introduction

For this project, I did a year and a half of research with a group of writers in Mexico City, some of who have written novels as well as contributing to cultural magazines and supplements. I investigated their relationship to the canon of Mexican national character studies. Since at least Sir James George Frazer, anthropologists have been students of classical texts, missionary accounts, and all sorts of literature about people and their customs. In more recent decades, anthropologists have also studied writing as a communication technology.⁷ They even have studied the way that anthropologists write about others.⁸ What has not been studied, until now, is how non-anthropologists use writing to reflect on themselves, on who they are, and what they have become.⁹

Arriving at the Research Topic

Imagine juxtaposing the Mexico City of today with the Mexico City of the 1960s. As with many metropolises around the world, the changes have been remarkable. I originally proposed to track these transformations, during what was a period of neoliberal reform, by studying coffee consumption.¹⁰ Even a decade ago there were no Italian-styled cafés like those popular today, nor were there niche markets. The Seattle-based Starbucks, for example, opened its first store in Mexico City in September 2002. This company now has nearly a hundred outlets spread across the city.¹¹ Moreover, Starbucks is just one of many enterprises that are taking part in the specialty coffee boom. There are a greater variety of coffee drinks, made with coffee from a greater number of origins, produced under a greater number of conditions (shade grown, bird-friendly, etc.), certified by a greater number of organizations (Fair Trade, certified organic, etc.), than ever before.

The growth and differentiation of the coffee market in Mexico City, the public's increased awareness and knowledge of the commodity, and the ways in which coffee has become an element in contemporary consumer lifestyles, appeared to me a good entry point into an investigation of the transformation of the Mexican capital into a global city.¹² It is not only that

7 Basso, "The Ethnography of Writing"; Goody and Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy"; Houston, "The Archaeology of Communication Technologies."

8 Clifford, *Writing culture*.

9 See "Intellectuals and Nationalism: Anthropological Engagements." My project differs from what they propose in that I studied writers less as intellectuals and social actors than as creators of new imaginaries appropriate for contemporary situations. The difference between my anthropological project and that of literary criticism is that I am not concerned about the "quality" of literature per se, but rather how it serves as a practice reflecting particular social situations.

10 The policy of import-substitution industrialization came to a close with the various periods of heated growth and slowdowns during the Luís Echeverría Álvarez administration (1970-76). Neoliberal reforms were introduced by the Miguel de la Madrid administration (1982-1988) in response to the severe monetary crisis of 1982 and continue in some form or another up until today.

11 See the webpage for Starbucks in Mexico, <http://mexico.starbucks.com/es-mx/>.

12 A global city (formerly, "world city") is an urban area that is important for the transnational accumulation and flow of capital; see Sassen, *The global city*. More recently, social scientists have begun to consider cultural production and the arts in determining the global importance of a city. In *Foreign Policy* magazine's 2008 ranking of global cities, Mexico City was ranked 25th overall and 9th in terms of "cultural experience," see Foreign Policy, A.T. Kearney, and The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, "The 2008 Global Cities Index."

Mexico City over the past two decades has become more integrated into international flows of capital, marketing, and information, but more importantly, from an anthropological perspective, these changes go hand in hand with changes in modes of life.

As I began my research, however, progress with the project quickly became obstructed. Key organizations expressed their reluctance to work with me unless I expressed a greater “commitment” to their cause. Understandably enough, the Mexican Fair Trade organization was wary of my view that Fair Trade coffee in Mexico was but one expression of a broader dynamic of market differentiation. Furthermore, by that time I was interpolated into a group of writers, all of whom were more than happy to cooperate with me on my research.

In the end, I am thankful that I faced these obstacles early on. They allowed me to regroup and adopt a broader perspective. Instead of focusing on one commodity and the relationship between consumer choice and market reasoning in Mexico City, I was able to address the contemporary situation in Mexico City more generally. What had particularly interested me in the differentiation of the coffee market was the degree to which coffee consumption had become a site over which the meaning of Mexico as a nation was debated and re-imagined. Studying with writers allowed me to focus on a site of creative cultural production that historically has been important in the creation of national imaginaries. Even though writers may feel that they have been marginalized by television and other newer forms of media, writing proves still to be a site where new forms of living in the present can be articulated.

The entry of Starbucks into Mexico was opposed by some consumer groups as another Yankee company taking advantage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to extract profits from the Mexican market. What brought the situation into particular relief was that the franchise imported even Mexican-grown coffee back into Mexico after being processed in the United States. In this respect, Starbucks could be contrasted with Café La Selva, a coffeehouse franchise owned by an organization of growers from Chiapas that offers 100% Mexican-produced and processed coffee.¹³ In this way choices over coffee consumption become inflected with national belonging and obligations. At a time when the state has all but abandoned fomenting an official national ideology through its patronage of the media and the arts, the nation is more than ever an effect of market forces and choices.¹⁴

Rather than changes in coffee consumption, a better entry point into this dynamic is the site of cultural production itself. In the end I spent a year and a half working with a group of writers in Mexico City. If consumers make choices, rationalize, and piece together their lifestyles, it is often writers working in the so-called cultural industries who give voice to and more widely circulate the rationale behind these newer consumer modes of existence. As the anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz has pointed out, in a country where reliable statistical data concerning the population has been notoriously lacking, it is left to intellectuals to divine the profile of Mexicans, the terms by which they are imagined.¹⁵

It is partly for this reason that Mexicans to this day continue to draw on and contribute to the literature on Mexican national character (*lo mexicano*); social scientists in the United States and

13 Café la Selva has nine stores in Mexico City, see www.cafelaselva.com.mx.

14 I address this subject most directly in Chapter VI.

15 Lomnitz-Adler, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*, 205.

other developed countries abandoned national character analysis in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁶ This dissertation interrogates how recent writing on Mexican national character in the capital differs from what was written there over the past century. Those readers looking for a description of Mexicans as they *really* are will be disappointed. Statistics, as already mentioned, have historically been of little use for determining much about the Mexican population. More than contributing to a store of knowledge, statistics have played a role in what Lomnitz has called state theater: “These statistics were not reliable or useful for internal social engineering, the way that colonial statistics had been. Instead, they were intended to create a mystique of modernity that would help secure a place for Mexico in the concert of nations.”¹⁷ What Lomnitz reveals about statistics is also true for other tools used by the social sciences.

It has been well documented that sociologists and anthropologists in Mexico were crucial throughout the twentieth century, not so much in using their disciplinary methodologies to discover the nation as they were in aiding the state in giving form and legitimacy to its official nationalist ideologies.¹⁸ Even to this day academics and other intellectuals are expected to direct their work toward solving “Great National Problems.” What this means, of course, is not only that Mexican sciences presuppose the nation, but that they continually work at reproducing it.¹⁹

In this dissertation, I intend to sidestep the problem of representation. I am not presenting my research as the latest and most authoritative study of what is perceived as Mexican culture or even that of the residents of Mexico City. On the contrary, this is a study of representations, not in order to determine how true or false they are, but as a way of discovering the logic by which they continue to be fabulated. It is crucial to understand that these narratives of Mexicanness are important not because they represent something that is real but because they create, as Lomnitz pointed out, “a mystique of modernity” that helps “secure a place for Mexico in the concert of nations.”²⁰ The work of writers is important not only to the degree that they reflect a reality beyond their writing but even more because their writing participates in a positional game. The manner in which these imaginings rework the old nationalist discourse in order to create one appropriate for a more transnational world is the subject of this dissertation.

The remainder of this introduction turns towards two modes of theoretical reflections that are pertinent to this project: those on contemporary processes of modernization and the tradition of national character studies and what has become of them within anthropology.

Modernization, Yet Again

In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels described capitalist development: “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production,

16 For an anthology of this literature, see Bartra, *Anatomía del mexicano*.

17 Lomnitz-Adler, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*, 205.

18 See David Brading's essay on the national importance of the “father of Mexican anthropology,” Brading, “Apéndice I: Manuel Gamio y el indigenismo oficial en México”; a more general review of the literature and an argument to this respect is given by the anthropologist Roger Bartra in Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and metamorphosis in the Mexican character*.

19 “[In Mexico] Social sciences are supposed to respond to Great National Problems, when in fact it is the social sciences that have named and given form to those problems in the collective imagination,” Lomnitz-Adler, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*, xvi.

20 Ibid., 205.

and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society... Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.”²¹ Even more so today, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of socialist projects around the world, it is clear that the logic Marx and Engels described is nowhere close to being exhausted. There have been significant changes to the capitalist mode of development, but the perpetual revolution in social relations has only quickened its pace and extended its scope.

The most pertinent sociological theory of contemporary capitalism to have appeared in the last decade is contained in a growing body of literature that uses the concept of reflexive or re-modernization.²² The advantage of this analysis is that it avoids the unfortunate notion, so popular during the 1990s, that modernization had come to a close, failed, or otherwise been superseded. What has in fact happened is that modernization, which is but another term for the capitalist developmental process described by Marx and Engels in the nineteenth century, has now entered into a second more extensive phase. Today, in many parts of the world, what is being reformed and reworked are no longer “traditional” and “premodern” customs but rather “modern” institutions and practices, products of first-wave modernization.

This is no place to deal with the various debates taking place among social theorists of second-wave modernization. What I highlight here, rather, is the specific way that my project contributes to this field of research. On the most general level I work at ameliorating some of the theory's Eurocentrism. The anthropologist Bruno Latour suggests that European modernity has been an “interpretation thrown on to an anthropological puzzle.” The anthropological puzzle, as he expresses it, is the mixture of “cosmos” and “science” that is to be found in any civilization. What made European modernity unique, according to him, is that “moderns” were able to affirm that there was no connection whatsoever between cosmos and society, and in the “same breath begin to experiment on a scale hitherto impossible with new and frightfully dangerous connections between cosmos and society – the atomic bomb being, of course, the culmination of this strange mixture before global warming took over as the ultimate learning experience of a really explicit mix between cosmos and society.”²³

For Latour, in as much as “moderns” are exceptional it is to the degree that they have divorced their interpretation of their practices from the practices themselves, obfuscated what they have really been up to. This view of modernization does not ring entirely true for me if only because it does not allow for a better understanding of the particular history of modernization in Mexico. To their credit, Ulrich Beck and his associates recognize that their paradigm needs to be nuanced: “Naturally this European constellation must be enlarged and reassessed by studying the effects of second modernity on non-European constellations, where the dynamic of reflexive modernization displays its effects not on first modern societies but rather on the distorted constellations of postcolonialism.”²⁴

21 Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party.”

22 Most of this literature take as point of departure Beck, Giddens, and Lash, *Reflexive modernization*; the research agenda is articulated in Beck and Lau, “Second modernity as a research agenda.”

23 Latour, “Is re-modernization occurring - And if so, how to prove it?,” 40.

24 Beck, Bonss, and Lau, “The theory of reflexive modernization - Problematic, hypotheses and research programme,” 7.

Mexico is an interesting case of comparison precisely because it has transitioned to a version of second modernization without having realized the objectives of first-wave modernization to the degree, for example, of other fellow member states of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).²⁵ In light of the failure of the Mexican state to realize the goals and promises of the original modernization project, what is being experienced in Mexico today is not so much a breakdown of the welfare state as the revitalization of the modernization project on alternative foundations.

For this dissertation I focus on two aspects of re-modernization theory and introduce a third aspect that is not sufficiently valued in the literature. First, according to the theory, first-wave modernization constitutes the nation-state as the most privileged and legitimate platform from which modernizing projects are articulated and enacted. The transition into second-wave modernization is marked, however, by the “undermining of every aspect of the nation-state: the welfare state; the power of the legal system; the national economy; the corporatist system that connected one with the other; and the parliamentary democracy that governed the whole.”²⁶ An institution that enabled modernization, the nation-state, eventually got in the way.

Second, during first-wave modernization, although individuals were considered to be equal, free, and their associations to be voluntary, in reality people's choices were constrained and they were assigned social roles quite independent of their will. The narratives that “modern” people told about themselves, during the first wave, often centered on their careers, families, and communities. These foci were relatively stable and allowed for comparatively linear biographies. For many reasons, not the least of which has been the adoption of more “flexible” modes of transnational capitalist accumulation and production, “subjectivity is now a product of self-selected networks, which are developed, through self-organization, into spheres that enable self-expression, and reinforce it through public recognition.”²⁷ This does not mean that reflexive individuals have more freedom and mastery than so-called modern ones did.²⁸ Rather, with re-modernization individuals realize that even without perfect knowledge they must still move forward and make choices that previous generations never had to. Instead of the linear biographies told about “modern” individuals, reflexive moderns today stitch their biographies together more in the spirit of bricolage. As Beck et.al. put it, “Second-modernity individuals haven't sufficient reflective distance on themselves to construct linear and narrative biographies.”²⁹

25 The OECD, founded in 1961, is made up of 30 member states. Most countries belonging to the European Union are members, as is the United States, Canada, Turkey, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Korea. Mexico became a member in May 1994, which was heralded as proof by the Salinas de Gortari administration that Mexico had finally made it to the “first world”. This claim would have perhaps been more credible if there had not been an armed uprising by poor indigenous farmers in the southern state of Chiapas in January of that year as well as the onset of severe economic crisis that December.

26 Ibid., 3.

27 Ibid., 3, 6, 25-6.

28 “Thus, ‘reflexive’ does not signal an increase in mastery and consciousness, but only a heightened awareness that mastery is impossible and that control over actions is now seen as a complete modernist fiction. In second modernity, we become conscious that consciousness does not mean full control.” Latour, “Is re-modernization occurring - And if so, how to prove it?” 36.

29 Beck, Bonss, and Lau, “The theory of reflexive modernization - Problematic, hypotheses and research programme,” 20, 23.

Third, one aspect that does not appear in this literature, at least not to the degree that it should, is the role of expectations.³⁰ For example, as recognized by the cited theorists, the equality and freedom of individuals, although codified into laws, was not in fact ever a reality. Freedom and equality continue to be ideals that are struggled for. In this respect, what has changed with modernization entering into its second phase is the general cynicism and disillusionment which surround these ideals, at least in regions such as Latin America. Mexico, for one, has always been a deeply divided country, subject to violence, repression, and the circumscription of freedoms. If my hypothesis for this research project is correct then what can be perceived in contemporary writing about Mexicanness over the past fifty years in Mexico City is that modernization is no longer perceived as a means of overcoming severe inequalities in wealth and opportunity, or of securing further freedoms and rights for individuals.

It is with their reflections on the role of history that Beck, Bonss, and Lau come closest to recognizing the role of expectations as I have come to see it from carrying out this research. They argue that first-wave modernization situated itself “in continuous history.”³¹ It has already been widely recognized that the proper subject of modern history is the state.³² Similarly, Beck and Lau write, “The beginning and end of modern society was identified with the past and future of the nation-state, as if there was nothing modern before it and nothing modern that could come after. But this understanding of history is wrong. The idea that the nation-state defines both the shape of history and the shape of the future is wrong.” They propose “that in second modern society the discrepancy between the national past and the global future will only grow.”³³ The expectations that people have about the future increasingly have less to do with their understandings of state and national histories.

It is not that nation-states have or are in danger of disappearing, or that they have ceased being the privileged subjects of history. Beck and associates are not describing a rupture after which nation-states wither away. In some respects the state is stronger in Mexico than ever before. Certainly the escalation of the war against drugs in recent years, specifically the deployment of the army, has increased the presence of the state throughout the country.³⁴ Furthermore, in the face of the severe worldwide economic recession, it is conceivable that the Mexican state, along with other states around the world, will regain some of its role in managing and regulating the economy which was lost during the period of neoliberal reform. What has changed, however, and what shows no sign of being reversed, is that the connection between state and nation, so vigorously maintained during the greater part of the twentieth century, has been greatly weakened.

The question is, what will writers do now that they are no longer being mustered by the state to address the “Great National Problems”? The national stereotypes and tropes, nurtured and

30 By contrast the anthropologist James Ferguson has also identified expectations as an important part of his research on modernization in Zambia, Ferguson, *Expectations of modernity*.

31 Beck, Bonss, and Lau, “The theory of reflexive modernization - Problematic, hypotheses and research programme,” 9.

32 See, for example, Hayden White's reflection on Hegel on this point, White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative discourse and historical representation*, 83.

33 Beck, Bonss, and Lau, “The theory of reflexive modernization - Problematic, hypotheses and research programme,” 11.

34 For a brief analytical overview of the war, see Council on Foreign Relations, “Mexico's Drug War.”

reproduced by so much writing and print, do not disappear from one day to the next. Ask anyone on the street in Mexico City and, while they might not be able to associate the ideas with Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz, they will have heard of the “inferiority complex of Mexicans” and the profound “solitude” that is supposed to plague the Mexican soul.³⁵ Ramos and Paz, like so many of their colleagues, believed that a proper implementation of the sciences and an understanding of history would one day result in Mexicans attaining a national subjectivity comparable to that of Europeans and Americans. After the failure of the state-led import-substitution industrialization strategy of modernization in Mexico, after over two decades of neoliberal disinvestment from the national cultural industries, it is no longer possible to be optimistic about a nationalist discourse that now appears to have served little else than to legitimize a first-wave modernizing push that failed to attain its promise of bettering the comparative position of Mexico among the “concert” of nations.

The Culture and Personality School

Philosophers have widely speculated on the character of nations, and social evolutionists during the nineteenth century had ordered nations and groups on a continuum from the most primitive to the most advanced. National character studies, however, did not come into their own in the social sciences until the early twentieth century.³⁶ As Norbert Elias made explicit in his research, this sort of inquiry was predicated on a sociogenetic law whereby psychogenesis, the psychological process by which individuals are formed into adults, was believed to parallel sociogenesis, the process by which civilizations develop. Children and “uncivilized” adults were considered to be roughly homologous, located at one extreme of the developmental spectrum. “[S]ince in our society each human being is exposed from the first moment of life to the influence and the molding intervention of civilized grown-ups, he must indeed pass through a civilizing process in order to reach the standard attained by his society in the course of its history.”³⁷

In the United States it was the so-called culture and personality school in anthropology that developed and gave the clearest articulation of this heuristic. Margaret Mead famously suggested in her work *Coming of Age in Samoa* that social pressures were responsible for the conflicted sexuality that women were considered to experience in the United States. In Samoa, she argued, women were more comfortable and open about sex because they were allowed to explore their sexuality with multiple partners before settling down with one man.³⁸ The most elaborated statement of the school's method was given by Ruth Benedict in *Patterns of Culture*. She believed that in each culture certain personality traits are selected for and privileged.³⁹

Benedict argued that anthropologists, by studying the personality of individuals, through a method much like gestalt, were capable of determining the overall culture type of a particular group. During World War II she was contracted by the US government to carry out a research

35 Ramos, *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México*; Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*.

36 In the crudest formulation of the comparative method used by evolutionists, difference in space was imagined to be roughly equivalent to difference in time. That is, the more human groups differed from Europeans and “moderns”, the further back they were located on the trajectory of evolutionary social development.

37 Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, xiii. “Uncivilized” is in quotes in the original.

38 Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A psychological study of primitive youth for Western civilization*.

39 Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*.

project on Japanese culture. Her resulting monograph concluded that the key to understanding the difference between the behavior of US and Japanese individuals was to comprehend that Americans are part of a “guilt culture” while the Japanese are part of a “shame culture”.⁴⁰ Perhaps the last explicit defense of this school of thought was given by Gregory Bateson in a short essay printed in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. He defended national character studies from its critics by appealing to methodological considerations and the importance that such investigations can have for war and peace in an international arena.⁴¹

Seen from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it seems self-evident that one should not jump too quickly from the personality of an individual to national culture and back again. Furthermore, it would be easy to dismiss the whole project of national character investigations as misguided, the result of a mutually beneficial endeavor between the US government, which during World War II and the Cold War was intent on generating information on others, and anthropologists who sought funding for their research. For these reasons and others, national character and personality have all but disappeared as valid basis for anthropological analysis in the United States. What has taken its place, namely the notion of “national cultures” is no less problematic from a methodological standpoint. The connection between an individual’s “culture” and the “culture” of his or her nation is no less problematic than the connection between individual and national personalities was.

National Cultures

In 1991, Robert J. Foster wrote a review of the anthropological literature on national cultures. By that time, national cultures had supplanted national character as an analytic. According to his understanding, “national cultures implies something other than the transmission of ‘national character,’ the stereotypic reproduction of enduring personality traits through child-socialization practices.” However, as he continued, “making national cultures always entails creation of the ‘national citizen,’ a particular kind of subject with a definite sort of historical consciousness, view of authority, and sense of self.”⁴² In other words, both national character and national culture reference a process by which certain types of nationally inflected subjects are formed. The difference is that in the former case subjects are understood psychologically, while in the latter they are conceived of politically.

Regardless of the intentions of the researchers involved, however, the adoption of “national culture” does little to address the problem of connecting the traits of individuals those of groups and collectives. This is made abundantly clear in Foster’s review of the literature. For example, in his conclusion he writes: “Nationalism thus posits the nation as a collective individual—an individuated being rather than a differentiated constituent of some encompassing order—itsself composed of individuated beings related to each other by their likeness.”⁴³ Anthropologists ultimately cannot escape from the problem of equating individuals with nations, even if they have distanced themselves from their own role in making such an equivalence, precisely because nationalists continue to posit it.

40 Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword : Patterns of Japanese culture*.

41 Bateson, “Morale and National Character.”

42 Foster, “Making National Cultures in the Global Ecumene,” 238.

43 Ibid., 253.

What has been gained in anthropological research from the early studies of Mead and Benedict, rather, is an understanding of nations as imagined communities whose very definition and boundaries are subject to debate and conflict. Among the contributions the constructivist bent has made to the social sciences, one is to predispose students of nations to resist assuming nations as objects independent of the contradictory processes and histories out of which they have risen. Notably nations have been created and recreated through coercion, violence, and resistance. The nation cannot be disassociated, at least not today, from the institutions, practices, and groups in the interests of which it has been invoked.

Nationalism and Media

This research project is situated between two subfields, the anthropology of nationalism and media anthropology. An obvious point of departure for the former is the work of Ernest Gellner.⁴⁴ He stressed the functional importance that nationalism had for what I have already described as first-wave modernization. Another, equally pivotal point of departure for research on nationalism is the book *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson. His work is much more appropriate for this project not only because he argues that nationalism is an effect of novels, newspapers, and other forms of print, but because his analysis, since it is not linked specifically to industrial relations of production, allows for extending his theory into the post-industrial enclaves and bourgeois circles in which I conducted my research in Mexico City.

The most pivotal series of anthropological works on Mexican nationalism to be published in recent years are those by Claudio Lomnitz-Adler.⁴⁵ And finally, the anthropologist who has most vociferously argued that nationalism has served a legitimizing purposes for the political party whose hold on power lasted over seventy years in Mexico is Roger Bartra.⁴⁶

The other body of relevant anthropological literature is that in the emerging field of media anthropology.⁴⁷ Anthropologists play an important role in studies of media because by conducting longterm research with media users they are able to work across the interval between media products and the multiple interpretations that consumers give of them. Lila Abu-Lughod, for example, by beginning with fliers distributed during Ramadan, is able to present the Egyptian nation as fragments resulting from multiple layers of messages and interpretations. The dissonance between the characters in the melodramas that Egyptians watch on television and their own lives allows for what Abu-Lughod refers to as the production of multiple alternative national ideologies.⁴⁸

What has been emphasized much less in media anthropology is the work of media creators themselves. In this sense this research project is more in line with William Mazzarella's research

44 Beginning with Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.

45 Lomnitz-Adler, *Exits from the Labyrinth*; Lomnitz-Adler, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*; Although Anderson is an essential reference to much of his work on nationalism, Lomnitz engages his book most directly in the chapter, "Nationalism as a Practical System: Benedict Anderson's Theory of Nationalism from the Vantage Point of Spanish America," in Lomnitz-Adler, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*.

46 See particularly his introduction to Bartra, *Anatomía del mexicano*; as well as Bartra, *The Imaginary Networks of Political Power*; and Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and metamorphosis in the Mexican character*.

47 See Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin, *Media Worlds: Anthropology on new terrain*.

48 Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of nationhood*.

with advertisers in India, or Ulf Hannerz's research with journalists, to the extent that I also did research with media creators.⁴⁹ My creators were a group of writers who began publishing in the 1980s during the rise of neoliberalism.⁵⁰

As I will argue in Chapters V and VI, writers in Mexico had grown increasingly critical of the import-substitution industrialization project of modernization by the mid 1960s. By the 1990s, writers coalesced around the call for democratization as the only hope to address the severe inequalities faced by Mexican citizens. The group of writers that I worked with have grown skeptical of the political system, the state and its promises. Today Mexico is being rocked by the highest incidence of violence in decades, all provoked by a government that is seeking to legitimize its power by waging an all-out war on drug trafficking. In the mid-twentieth century, the modernizing project inspired widely shared expectations that hinged on the state-managed national project. Increasingly, however, Mexicans feel that they are on their own in confronting the hazards of contemporary life. If this is true for Mexicans generally, it is particularly true for bourgeois writers like the ones with whom I did my research. As I will show, these writers feel that their only hope is in abandoning their Mexicanness. For them, Mexico's national history is a history of failure, the failure to become truly modern, part of "the concert" of European and North American nations.⁵¹ The disillusionment that these Mexican writers feel towards the impact of first-wave modernization leads them to envisage a second-wave modernization ethos.

An Ethos for a Post-Mexican Condition

In Mexico, as Lomnitz has pointed out, writers have been privileged interpreters of the nation. The chronicler, in particular, "accompanies the community, guides it through its dilemmas, consoles it in its grief, and shares its triumph. Mimesis with the people is such that this intellectual is a natural representative of the nation."⁵² This was the nationalist mode. Today, however, that mode of symbiosis and mimesis has broken down. In this dissertation I describe how this "breakdown" has occurred in Mexico City. The marginalization of writers, however, has not been the writers' fault, at least not entirely. Writers throughout Latin America have lost the worldwide recognition and respect they attained mid-twentieth century with the so-called boom in Latin American literature.⁵³ What that means is that writers have much less of a platform from which they can play a role as public intellectuals. Many blame the dominance of television and other media. The truth is that the marginalization of print and the loss of respect for writers in Mexico City is just one aspect of a much larger phenomenon connected to what I am denoting with the term re-modernization.

Anthropologists working on nationalism have long contended that nations are fragmented imaginary collectives dependent on momentary, shifting and contested performances and interpretations. In pointing this out, it could be said that anthropologists demonstrate that they too are second-phase modernization individuals. According to Beck and his coauthors, "The

49 Mazzarella, *Shoveling smoke*; Hannerz, *Foreign news*.

50 This coincided for the most part with the Carlos Salinas de Gortari administration (1988-94).

51 This sentiment is perhaps best expressed in the work of Luis González de Alba, see, for example, González de Alba, "Mentiras de mis maestros"; González de Alba, *Y sigo siendo sola*.

52 Lomnitz-Adler, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*, xi-xii.

53 Jean Franco describes this history in Franco, *The decline and fall of the lettered city*.

foremost public task of science is no longer to silence controversies, but rather to enable them, that is, to enable different public voices to be heard and to make themselves count.”⁵⁴ Mead and Benedict, with the certainty that their social positions and first-phase modernist methods gave them, reported the character of this or that group with a definitive authority. Today, the role of science is different. Its job is to report the problems. The nation is nothing if not a problem space, with its opposing interests and forces.

Moreover, what is true here for the sciences is also true for literature. Jean Franco has described how the utopianism of mid-twentieth century literature in Latin America has given way to disutopianism. She puts it this way: “What many describe as the end of the utopian is a mild way of describing what has been lived in much of Latin America as historical traumas, in the aftermath of which both politics and culture have been irrevocably dislocated.”⁵⁵ First-wave modernization, whether implemented by regimes on the political left or right, promised new and better societies through the proper utilization of science and technology. The development of literature was also predicated on this possible collective future. Franco calls the future as it used to be imagined by literature the “lettered city”. It is not so much that political regimes have stopped claiming that they will better the conditions for their constituents but that their claims are now more modest, their economic policies more circumspect, and they can no longer count on the broad, legitimizing cooperation of writers.

In this way, literature in Mexico today could be said to be adequate to a re-modernizing reality. Writers no longer count on or recreate Utopia. The future they project is often a reformulated version of the “ruins” they see in the present. The national narratives that served to justify attempts at first-phase modernization now appear in their writings as narratives of defeat, limitations, and failure.

Given this situation, some writers have adopted a postnational genre of literature, dirty realism. If the nation-state was the object of history and the future “lettered city” the object of much literature in Latin America, then dirty realism is postnational as well as agnostic about the future. Writers, in chronicling national lives and writing about national characters, used to orchestrate a certain “symbiosis” with and between their compatriots. Dirty realism, as a form of chronicle, functions differently.⁵⁶ It no longer functions in facilitating the imagination of national communities or contains narrative predicated on better futures. It no longer expects anything other than what appears as actual now. It is not that history and the state have disappeared, but they must be reworked, re-purposed, made adequate to re-modernized contemporary living conditions. This dissertation describes how a group of writers in Mexico City are doing just that.

54 Beck, Bonss, and Lau, “The theory of reflexive modernization - Problematic, hypotheses and research programme,” 21.

55 Franco, *The decline and fall of the lettered city*, 260.

56 For an argument about the ethical impulse motivating dirty realism's chronicle form, see Birkenmaier, “Dirty Realism at the End of the Century: Latin American apocalyptic fictions.”

Chapter II: Cosmopolitan Post-Mexicans

With this chapter, I introduce Ari and Rogelio, two writers with whom I worked during my year and a half of dissertation research in Mexico City. I also introduce the notion of Post-Mexicanness, first by explaining the dynamic of performing Mexican and then by delving into the subject more directly through Rogelio's critique of Mexican cinema. Through a discussion of the film *Who the Hell is Juliette?* I demonstrate that one way to arrive at a post-Mexican condition is through a disillusionment with leftist politics. Finally, I argue that post-Mexicanness is a state of mind that writers arrive at through a play of class distinction and a market logic by which "Mexican" is made into a brand consumable on the international market.

Arriving in Mexico City

It was a cool Thursday evening when I was welcomed to Mexico City by friends, an anthropologist I had gone to school with and his wife. Their apartment was in the heart of the Hipódromo-Condesa neighborhood, right off Park México. At the beginning of the twentieth century the area was a racetrack. Then, between 1920 and 1950, it was built over with homes and apartments designed by architects working in the latest European styles. One can find there, for example, the best specimens of Art Deco in the city. Various waves of immigrants have populated the neighborhood. Notably, in the 1920s many Jews from Poland and the Ukraine made their home there. In the late 1930s and early 1940s they were joined by Republicans fleeing the Spanish Civil War. Hit hard by the earthquake of 1985, property values declined and the neighborhood became attractive and accessible to artists and other creative types who moved in and claimed it as their own.⁵⁷ Today the Condesa is one of the trendiest neighborhoods in Mexico City, home to the writers and editors that appear in this dissertation.

Before I got my own small studio on a rooftop just north of the neighborhood, I slept nights on a blue-vinyl couch in my friends' apartment. It was in the vicinity of that couch and the adjacent glass-topped coffee table, where we often spent evenings playing rummy, that I got to know the two people without whom this research project would have been impossible. The Thursday night I arrived, the anthropologist's wife took me to meet one of those people, Ari, at a neighborhood bar. By the time we got to Barney's, Ari had already installed himself in the first booth inside the front door. He was evidently in high spirits. Some days before he had completed an article for the popular weekly magazine *Día Siete*.⁵⁸ It consisted of seven biographical sketches, illustrated by photographs, of Jewish immigrants to Mexico. Ari is himself a Jewish immigrant, born in Israel to Mexican Jews some thirty years ago. The article was one installment in a larger project on immigrants. The next group that he was writing about was Lebanese immigrants to Mexico City. "If only I can write two of these installments per month, I can get by," he told me. A few moments later, he ordered another whiskey on the rocks.

The bar was packed, and since the three of us were near the entrance, there were many people standing next to our booth. Many of them greeted Ari as they passed. At one point, a young woman with long golden hair and blue eyes came and squeezed in beside him for a few minutes. When she left to join her friends in the next booth he leaned over and explained, "She is my

⁵⁷ For a history of the neighborhood, see Porras, *Condesa, Hipódromo*.

⁵⁸ Volovich, "Judíos en México."

cousin, but that doesn't mean that I wouldn't like to fuck her." He switched from Spanish to English effortlessly, and with his cousin he had spoken Hebrew. He was affable enough and quickly endeared himself to me, but there was a confidence, even cockiness, that I had not expected. In fact, the whole bar was full of people who reminded me of no one I had met or gotten to know in Mexico before. Sometime later, the anthropologist joined us. Some time after that, Ari insulted a fellow female customer that had gotten in the way of him ordering yet another whiskey. And some time after that there was a disagreement between Ari and the anthropologist about paying the tab. They finally resolved it, and we all got up and went home.

The next evening, while together in the anthropologist and his wife's living room, I told Ari that I thought that he was a "bitter man," and that it was his bitterness that motivated or tainted much of his behavior. Now I would say rather that Ari is cynical. Furthermore, it is this cynicism, particularly in as much as it has to do with Mexicanness, that forms the core of this research project. For now, however, I want to introduce Ari as a relatively fluid individual, who through his performance of identity calls into question essentialist notions of national belonging. In this he is not exceptional. As such social thinkers as Zygmunt Bauman have noted, modern urban individuals are often forced to stitch their lives together as a series of short-term projects. Identities are less stable than they used to be.

A Transnational People

Ari is the second of three boys. Both he and his older brother were born in Israel while their younger brother was born in Mexico. His older brother told me how difficult it had been for him when his parents decided to move the family back to Mexico right when he was beginning middle school. "It is such an important time in the life of a person, a moment when one wants to have friends and fit in," he explained to me. But just when he felt that he had finally been able to make a life for himself, have friends and an identity in Mexico City, his parents decided to move again, back to Israel. Ari was young enough so that he was able to adapt back to life in Israel; his older brother was not. Ari's older brother told me that since he had not gone through all the important rites of passage with friends back in Israel, he returned as an outsider, someone who felt he would never be able to fully reintegrate himself.

When Ari's family once again moved back to Mexico, this time definitively, Ari's older brother vowed never to return to Israel. Ari, on the other hand, has returned to Israel over the years to visit family and friends and presents himself in Mexico as an Israeli. By contrast, the youngest of the brothers, who was born in Mexico, appears to me and his brothers as quite content identifying himself as Mexican and does not express the existential angst that his brothers say they grapple with from time to time.

Performing Mexican

If I had to list the attributes that ensure that an individual is considered Mexican, I would begin with place of birth. Unlike other countries which have a differently constructed racial component, in Mexico you can be considered Mexican even if you are the first of your family to be born in the country, whatever your race might be. Constitutionally, those who are born to Mexican parents outside of Mexico have the right to Mexican citizenship. What I am considering

here is national belonging as judged by compatriots and not the possession of legal documents; being born outside of the country always marks an individual with at least a trace of inauthenticity. The second attribute is one's language skills, the ability to speak Spanish in a manner that is convincingly Mexican. Thirdly, inclusion in Mexico as a nation is governed by the racial figure of the mestizo, a person of mixed ancestry, specifically of both European and Native American parentage.

These then are the three principle points used by Mexicans when deciding who is included in their group: place of birth, language, and certain phenotypic characteristics. Of course there are many other elements that can strengthen one's level of belonging, not the least of which are Mexican relatives and access to social networks in the country, ownership of property, and knowledge of Mexican customs, history and an ability in navigating its institutions. However, in general, one needs to have been born in Mexico, speak a Mexican form of Spanish, and exhibit some mestizo racial characteristics to be considered Mexican by the majority of people living in Mexico.

According to these criteria, I am not a Mexican. Only under certain circumstances can I pass as one because I fail on two accounts: I was not born in Mexico and am not phenotypically mestizo. Of course, I could strengthen my case for inclusion, and have, by stressing my kinship relations to Mexicans and my knowledge of national institutions, but these can only afford me marginal and symbolic effects. Ari, on the other hand, more consistently passes as Mexican even though he also fails on the same two accounts: he was neither born in the country nor is he mestizo. However, unlike me, Ari actually has Mexican citizenship, is much more integrated into Mexican networks, is effective in exploiting them, has lived in Mexico a long time, and is exceptionally skilled in Mexican Spanish. What should be noted here is that Ari and I present ourselves as foreigners while in Mexico.⁵⁹

Although there was a time when I more strongly identified with my Mexican roots and more actively sought to strengthen them, I eventually got comfortable with being identified as an "American". If at one point Mexico and my level of Mexicanness afforded me critical distance from the United States, I now have spent enough time in Mexico to realize that my "Americanness" also affords me a critical distance from that which I find lamentable in Mexico. Alternatively, presenting myself as a foreigner liberated me from the pressure of trying to conform and pass as an authentic Mexican. Situating myself as a US minority while in Mexico seems now to afford me greater political and psychological gains than if I were situated as the Mexican I once strove to be. It would be much more difficult to surmise the reasons that Ari has for presenting himself as an Israeli, which he also is, since I have never actually broached the subject with him. What is clear to me is that both Ari and I have something to gain from presenting ourselves as foreigners while in Mexico. It is not only that we can avail ourselves of the critical distance that I have mentioned, but we can use it in a way that scores for us marginal but symbolic positional victories.

When Ari and I engage in conversation with Mexicans in Mexico City, we either pass as white Mexicans, because of our language skills, or our interlocutors, perceiving us as foreigners, ask us: "Why do you as a foreigner speak so much like a Mexican?" On one occasion I overheard

59 Contrarily, I have had occasion to observe Ari presenting himself as a Mexican when outside of the country.

Ari respond that he had learned Spanish while living in Mexico. “How long have you lived in Mexico?” his interlocutor insisted. “Three years,” Ari replied. “Only three years!” his questioner retorted in disbelief. Of course, Ari did not mention that his parents are both Mexican, that he has been exposed to Mexican Spanish all of his life, and that he lived in Mexico for some years as a child. These considerations would have lessened the shock and Ari’s symbolic gains. Nevertheless, the disbelief with which Ari’s language abilities are regarded is evidence of a presupposition made by many who regard themselves as Mexicans.

Challenging the Essentialist Creed

The anthropologist Roger Bartra has called this presupposition the essentialist creed. Millions of Mexicans, the world over, believe that there is something inherent to their kind. Although this national substance is expressed in a myriad of ways, it runs deep and is common to all “true” Mexicans. In this, they would be in agreement with Octavio Paz, although they might express themselves differently. Bartra finds a root to the creed in a fourth-grade textbook from 1992 that concludes with the statement: “Human history is full of disintegrated nations and groups of people that did not have the fortune of becoming nations.” Implied here is that Mexico is not one of these unfortunate nations. Mexican children are to understand “that Mexico avoided, thanks to who knows what benevolent deity, falling into the trash heap of the cursed, those without character and a rich national history.” Asks Bartra, “Is this not a disastrous invitation... to Mexican children to continue extracting from the unfathomable depths of identity the mythical resources that would help them to tolerate misery with dignity?”⁶⁰

The myth of national character and unity, for Bartra, has only served to legitimize what turned out to be the most stable political regime of the twentieth century, over seventy years of power for the Institutionalized Revolutionary Party (PRI). The ideology that Mexicans are not only essentially unique from other people but also exceptionally blessed with a rich and dynamic national history, as well as abundant natural and cultural resources, has played a key role in the control of the Mexican populace. As long as Mexicans feel exceptional and privileged they are more likely to tolerate hardship and to put up with corruption and abuses of power.

A foreigner who speaks like a Mexican is an assault on such an essentialist creed. Although I listed being born in Mexican territory as the first principle of national inclusion, this principle is only properly put into operation if the person speaks a Mexican form of Spanish, that is, also adheres to the second principle.⁶¹ Unsurprisingly, language most fully carries national essence. Echoing philosophers from Aristotle to Hegel, many Mexicans apparently continue to believe that the voice gives the least mediated and most immediate expression to the affections of the soul.⁶² Even those mestizos who were born in Mexico but lost or never learned an adequately

60 Bartra, *Anatomía del mexicano*, 12 All translations from Mexican sources are mine.

61 Native Americans who speak standard Mexican Spanish poorly, or with telltale inflections, are often discriminated against as second-class citizens.

62 In Book II Chapter 8 of *De Anima*, Aristotle writes, “Voice is a kind of sound characteristic of what has soul in it...” Aristotle, “*De Anima*,” 572. And he begins *De Interpretatione* with “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words,” thereby establishing a privilege of spoken over written words, Aristotle, “*De Interpretatione*,” 40. In other translations of this passage, what is rendered here as “mental experience” appears as “affections of the soul.” Taking both of these statements together, it is possible to see that Aristotle conceived of voice as having a special relationship with the soul (or

Mexican Spanish are regarded with suspicion. How can a Mexican not speak as a Mexican? By a logic that inverts the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, language stands in for a national mode of existence and is the most patent sign of what is considered a unique inherited configuration of thoughts and feelings.⁶³

For example, I know that what allows me to pass as a Latino, and even sometimes as a Mexican, is that I speak an appropriate form of Spanish. Although my whiteness is always an initial cause of doubt, my knowledge of language will eventually override other considerations. To pass as a white Latino or Mexican is to pass as a privileged subject.⁶⁴ I have many times seen with what low regard fellow Chicanos have been treated because of their darker skin tone and poorer language skills. Yes, to be mestizo is to conform to the national racial type, but when mestizos fail to speak Spanish like Mexicans they can be nothing but racial imposters; at best they are seen as Mexicans who have lost their national soul. “Are not most Mexican-Americans but the children of poorly educated Mexicans who were forced to immigrate to the United States for economic reasons? Would it not be overly generous to assess their situation as that of people who have lost their culture, when it is more likely the case that they were never very cultivated to begin with?”⁶⁵ That is, working class immigrants have little “high culture”. To be white and Mexican, on the other hand, is to be from an elite class. To be white and from Israel or the United States is to be from a country that is higher up on the global pecking order. So Ari mostly passes as the white Mexican that he is, and at other times, he takes pleasure in unsettling essentialist beliefs in the Mexican nation by identifying himself, in fluent Mexican Spanish, as a metropolitan foreigner.

Replicante Magazine

The anticipation was building. The anthropologist had spoken so much about Rogelio that he had begun to take on mythical proportions in my imagination. Ari too spoke wonders about him, saying: “I owe everything that I have as a writer to that man.” So it was with no little excitement

mental experience), a much closer relationship, at least, than does writing. For an account of Hegel's position and an overall critique of the tradition of privileging the voice over writing, see Harris, *Rethinking Writing*, 225 ff.

63 This is an inversion of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis because it is not language that is viewed as influencing thought but rather a peculiar national essence, a national way of thinking and attitude that gives rise to a specific enactment of a language.

64 For a sensitive and nuanced account of race in Mexico, see Lewis, “*Blacks, Black Indians, Afromexicans: The dynamics of race, nation, and identity in a Mexican moreno community (Guerrero)*.” Lewis associates being “white” with having *material* power, while being “Indian” is to have *symbolic* power. Furthermore, she felt that as a “white” anthropologist from the United States, she had an advantage in working with “blacks” in Mexico since she was not a “white Mexican.” The particular valence that “white Mexican” had in this research should be judged by understanding that the context was one where nobody identified themselves as either “black” or “Indian”.

65 That Mexicans travel to the United States only for economic reasons is one discursive element of the Mexican national myth, or official celebration of Mexico. According to such reasoning, since Mexico has been so highly favored by history, culture, and nature, why would Mexicans want to go to the United States other than motivated out of dire need? How could Mexicans want to live anywhere else than within the temporal borders that circumscribe their true spiritual home? This is one of many components of the national myth that a current generation of writers are dismantling, not to mention the 40% of Mexicans who would “jump the national ship” and live in another country if they could. See González González, Martínez i Coma, and Schiavon, *Mexico, the Americas and the World. Foreign policy: public and leader opinion 2008*, 23.

that I received the news that I would finally meet Rogelio. Loved and respected by almost everyone who knows him, Rogelio is a man in his early fifties who is loved and respected by almost everyone who knows him. He is a writer and editor that worked with the National Human Rights Commission in Mexico. After resigning from the Commission, in 2004 he founded, with Roberta Garza, his third counter-cultural journal. Besides financing the magazine out of her own pocket, Garza contributes with her editorial experience.⁶⁶ The magazine is called *Replicante*, after the illegal bioengineered characters in *Blade Runner* (1982), the cyberpunk cult film by Ridley Scott set in a futuristic Los Angeles modeled in part on Mexico City.⁶⁷ Along with its title, the magazine's subtitle, *Ideas for a country in ruins*, hints at the journal's mission as well as its irreverent, often cynical, and critical tone.

In the editorial introduction to the first issue, Rogelio writes: "It would seem that the current moment is not the most appropriate for thinking of founding a new cultural journal, but the truth is that today there are few spaces where one can read texts that seriously grapple with the vicissitudes of contemporary human beings... *Replicante* is an aggressive magazine designed in a spirit that corresponds to the vertiginous times in which we live."⁶⁸ Each issue is organized around a theme. The first issue was on migration, racism, and miscegenation; the second on ideology; the third on the myth of postmodernism; the fourth on eroticism and sexuality; the fifth on art; sixth on literature; seventh on the city; eighth on science; ninth on religion; tenth on music; eleventh on humor; and the twelfth number, which I will turn to subsequently, is on cinema.

Cultural Exports

Seeking to establish a useful research contact, I mentioned to Rogelio that I had browsed through his book *The Dilemma of Bukowski*. The anthropologist had it on the bookcase off to one side of the couch. Rogelio appeared to be flattered. Some time later the group of friends that had been invited for dinner turned to discuss the so-called new Mexican cinema, and Rogelio commented on the first movie by Carlos Marcovich, *Who the Hell is Juliette?* (1997).⁶⁹ I had seen the movie at a film festival the year before and knew that it had been received well by the critics, yet I found myself pleased to hear Rogelio comment on it unfavorably.

Rogelio's critique of the movie is included in *The Dilemma of Bukowski*. Since I was expressing my agreement with his assessment of the film, Rogelio recommended that I take a look at it. As Rogelio points out, the film is built around the supposed resemblance between two young women, one Mexican and the other Cuban. The Mexican, Fabiola Quiroz, is for Rogelio a

66 Garza is now the Director of *Milenio Semanal*, a weekly news and general interest magazine that both Ari and Rogelio now regularly contribute to.

67 The two earlier magazines were *La Regla Rota*, which ran from 1984 to 1987, and *La Pus Moderna*, running from 1989 to 1996. The title of the first magazines could be translated into English as *The Broken Rule* as long as one understands that the Spanish word for rule is the same as that for ruler. The title of the second magazine would be *Modern Pus* in English. *Replicante*, the first number of which appeared in the fall of 2004, is the first of Rogelio's magazines to be made available through mainstream commercial channels throughout Mexico. For one review of the journal, see Roque, "Replicante, un espacio para nuevos escritores."

68 Villarreal, "Exculpatorio..." 1.

69 Marcovich and Error de Diciembre (Firm); Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía.; Kino International Corporation., *Quién diablos es Juliette?*

“typical Mexican model taking her first steps in New York.” She is the daughter of a “vulgar, short, and fat woman from Michoacán and a man she never knew—a supposed archaeologist from Canada, according to her mother, or a pale-skinned farmer like the ones common to that area of Michoacán, according to a neighbor.” She is a “model with pretensions of becoming an actor and even a writer.”⁷⁰

In the film, Quiroz “struggles to achieve a coherent discourse—with an irritating and snobbish intonation—and attempts to pass off her photogenic and frequent crying episodes as authentic outburst from her soul.” She is not content simply with offering up her breasts to the audience, “insinuating a more than probable sexual liaison with the director of the film, and showing off a large photograph of herself carelessly taken by Francesco Clemente in her New York studio. Fabiola, with insufferable intellectual insolence disguised as candor, feels compelled to announce the improbable publication of her novel about a boy who, oh!, ‘had a really tough life...’”⁷¹

In similar fashion, Rogelio glosses the Cuban protagonist Yuliet Ortega as a “shameless and endearing mixed race woman from Havana, who like thousands of others on the Island has been pushed into prostitution.” Ortega is the daughter of a man “who abandoned his family to try his luck and remake his life in the United States.” Her mother committed suicide a year after her father left. “She earns a few dollars sleeping with fat Italian tourists with diminutive pricks and complicates her life with nothing more than being a bad influence on her nephew and unsuccessfully attempting to correctly pronounce ‘acting’ (*actuar*) in Spanish: ‘an-tual,’ ‘al-tual,’ ‘ac-tual...’”⁷²

As far as the supposed resemblance between the two protagonists around which the movie is constructed, it completely falls apart, remaining, if at all, on a purely superficial plane. As far as Rogelio is concerned, “the innocuous Fabiola, with her doubtful artistic and intellectual aspirations, pales before the withering and abrupt honesty of the ingenious sometimes-whore who rarely loses her composure even given the tragedy that encircles her Island, that flaming paradisaical bordello for European tourists that is thirty years into a revolution that promised an entirely new man and woman.”⁷³

As already mentioned, the movie was well received by critics. The film was deemed “an ebullient burst of cinematic energy” by Stephen Holden of *The New York Times*; “elegantly innovative” by Emanuel Levy for *Variety* magazine; it was given four stars by the *San Francisco Chronicle*; and José María Espinasa, in *La Jornada Semanal*, declared that the film “demonstrated that good cinema could be made in Mexico.”⁷⁴ But even though the film exhibits an “effective variety of formal techniques,” ones that can also be seen, reminds Rogelio, on MTV and other commercial television shows, it fails to capture the vitality of its best protagonist and the tragic dimension of her story.⁷⁵ A good documentary could be made just of Yuliet Ortega

70 Villarreal, *El dilema de Bukowski*, 136-7.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., 137.

74 As quoted in Ibid., 135-8.

75 Ibid., 139 The reference to MTV is not gratuitous. Marcovich shot a music video for the pop song “Tonto Corazón” by the Mexican singer Benny Ibarra in Havana in which both Fabiola Quiroz and Yuliet Ortega appear. Segments of this music video are included in his later movie. It could be argued that *Who the Hell is Juliette?* begins and ends like a music video, that is with the business of discovering, hiring and promoting actors and

and her life in Cuba. She is a character rich enough to not need the “hollow noise” of Fabiola Quiroz robbing the spotlight from her. This much comes through the film.

But not only is Marcovich unable to appreciate the exceptionalness of Ortega, he insists on stamping out of her anything of interest, ironing her intriguing complexity into the paper-thin dimensions of Quiroz. As if he were directing a reality show along the lines of so many that hinge on the transformation of their protagonists, he brings Ortega to Mexico and introduces her to “Glenda”, the manager of a modeling agency. Ortega, we see, is going to be made into a model just like Quiroz. Is this not for her a dream come true, an opportunity that would have never been available to her in Cuba?

What could be more heartwarming than a prostitute from a poor island being given the opportunity to become a model and actor in a free and democratic country? So the film concludes with Ortega falling “into the generous trap set by Marcovich, Fabiola, and Glenda. Right before signing her name on the dotted line, she is only barely able to whisper ‘I don’t want to leave Havana...,’” that being the last sigh of a once boisterous Cuban on the threshold of “securing her entrance into her new neoliberal paradise.”⁷⁶ Rogelio summarizes his assessment of the movie by offering this alternative title for the film: “How to transform an uncultured prostitute into a spectacular model for a pretentious modeling agency.”⁷⁷ The appealing narrative is only sweetened by the fact that the prostitute who is transformed comes from a socialist country and those who make it all possible for her from capitalist Mexico.

In my interpretation, the question in the title of the film *Who the Hell is Juliette?* must allude to the transformation suffered by both the protagonists. In the time scale of the film the transformation occurred for Quiroz in the past and continues in the present, while the transformation of Ortega begins in the present and is projected into the future. Quiroz, a provincial Mexican who has moved to New York, becomes a model and actor, and aspires to be a writer. Ortega, on the other hand, is discovered as a poor young woman in Havana by the director Marcovich, given a part in his film, and through the course of the movie is brought to Mexico to further her possible career in acting and to begin modeling. There is a progressive scale that extends from Havana, at one extreme, to Mexico City, and on to New York at the other. The two protagonists, both missing their fathers, progress along the scale by selling themselves and their attributes, thanks to Mexican packaging and marketing.

The story portrayed in the movie could be classified under those that tell how human attributes are commodified and finally stripped of all that makes them interesting and compelling in the first place. For Rogelio, the story is a tragedy, one in which a Mexican making a movie in the Hollywood style, allied with marketers, advances a commercial machine producing salable but vapid products. He concludes his musing by hoping that “like the Nexus replicants in *Blade Runner*,” Ortega “might ultimately turn against her creator.”⁷⁸

models.

76 Ibid., 137-8.

77 Ibid., 135.

78 Ibid., 139.

Brave New Capitalist World

More than the grittiness of *Blade Runner*, though, it is the hygienic sterility of Aldus Huxley's *Brave New World* that is projected in *Who the Hell is Juliette?* Of course, as Levy also wrote in *Variety*, the film is "... vastly entertaining," largely because of the voyeuristic thrill that we as viewers feel in being given glimpses of the intimate lives of two young and attractive protagonists.⁷⁹ Rogelio's criticisms aside, the film is considered good because it recommends itself to more exacting viewers by sublimating, that is adds a second degree of reflexivity, to a pleasure that is commonly indulged by more pedestrian, reality-based television programming. Furthermore, the film's politics make it appealing to a particular segment of the population. Cajoling the middle-class is a strategy that cannot fail to reap dividends. Nothing seems to please the contemporary consumerist Western bourgeoisie more than to be told again and again that the entire world desires to be just like them, that their judgments of taste are truly universal.

TV Martí is a television station owned and run by the United States government that transmits programming to Cuba with the purpose of "promoting an open and plural society." Given the US government's policy towards Cuba, the station not surprisingly celebrated Marcovich's movie, broadcasting a segment entirely dedicated to its analysis.⁸⁰ The host of the TV Martí segment, La Pantalla de Azogue, began the program by saying that the director "broaches aspects of reality in Cuba by taking as point of reference this girl that has, for sure, a very special magnetism with the camera."⁸¹ Like Rogelio, who once belonged to the Communist Party in Mexico, the host is taken by Yuliet Ortega at the same time that her story provides for him ample artillery with which to lambaste Fidel Castro and his regime.

Take for example, continues the host, how Ortega speaks "contradictorily that health [sic] is free," in Cuba, "which is the rhetoric of the government, that education is free" too. What you are free to do is to "go and prostitute yourself." For the host, the ridiculousness of the ideology propagated by the Cuban dictatorship can be found in the double sidedness of the "freedom" it offers. Some services are provided free of charge, but conditions are so difficult that one must go even to the extreme of prostituting oneself, as Ortega does, in order to survive. In criticizing the Cuban regime and its ideology, however, the host of the TV Martí segment falls into an inconsistency. He criticizes the official ideology of the Cuban regime because it ignores the sordid reality, but is content to treat the propaganda that he is a spokesperson for as if it were true. How does he justify, for example, people prostituting themselves, for reasons not unlike those of Ortega's, in the United States? Does he really believe that providing universal schooling and healthcare for citizens are the causes for prostitution in Cuba?

"With characteristic ease and disinterest, Yuliet says truths," continues the host of La Pantalla de Azogue. In Cuba, "one attends primary school and secondary school, but after that the university and careers are for people with connections, with influence, and in the end Yuliet doesn't study, in the end Yuliet is but an animal of the street." Again, it is easy to see that the conditions in

⁷⁹ Ibid., 136.

⁸⁰ TV Martí, along with Radio Martí, are under the jurisdiction of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting of the International Broadcasting Bureau. Their Mission Statement can be located at <http://www.martinoticias.com/mision.asp>.

⁸¹ This and all subsequent quotes from the TV Martí program are taken from the following clips, TV Martí, *¿Quién diablos es Yuliet?*; TV Martí, *¿Quién diablos es Yuliet?*; TV Martí, *¿Quién diablos es Yuliet?*

Cuba that the television host is using Ortega to describe also exist in capitalist countries. It is certainly true that an imperfect meritocracy in the United States and decentralized control may allow for more people to climb up the social ladder than in other places, but it is also true that there are those who find themselves in the United States and Mexico, like Ortega in Cuba, unable to continue their education and establish a career because they lack aptitude, connections and influence.

In truth, the criticism of the Cuban regime put forward by Rogelio and the TV Martí host tell us more about these two men than it does about Cuba. The host, just like Rogelio, may have himself at one time believed in the ideology of the Cuban Revolution. For generations of Latin Americans who dreamed of living in a better world, the Cuban Revolution was a symbol of hope and possibility. What inflects Rogelio and the TV Martí host's criticisms with sarcasm is the Revolution's ultimate failure to deliver on its promise to recreate an entirely new man and woman. After referring to the squalor that Ortega lives in, the defense mechanisms she employs, and her poor language skills, the host presents Ortega as a direct product of Ernesto Guevara's faulty theory of revolutionary action. "Look at what the New Woman has ended up as!" he exclaims. The Revolution, evidently, was a fraud. For those who once believed, recognizing and criticizing this fact has never been more important than today.

Disillusionment with revolution is one path by which to arrive at the ideology that holds consumer choice as the ultimate liberty. The host of the TV Martí program tells us that Ortega sums up the spirit of his entire program: "I want that my country improves and that everyone can have what they want... and that nobody has to do what they don't want to do." In intimating that this is also his wish for Cuba, we are expected to understand that what is needed to make conditions better in Cuba is a change of regime and democratization. But while the host can use Ortega's dream of a better life to criticize the regime of Fidel Castro, he cannot detail a concrete proposal to realize it. His critical stance with respect to the potential of leftist revolutionary action leads him, cynically, to become a spokesperson for a late-capitalist brand of reasoning that offers no promises other than the possibility of individual self-realization through consumption.

One could express the line of reasoning this way: The Cuban Revolution was lamentable because it never realized its goal of providing a better life for everyone and resulted in a dictatorial regime that perpetuates disparities, the committing of human rights abuses, corruption, and otherwise limits the freedoms of an imprisoned population. The most eloquent arguments against this regime are those like Ortega's, which express a sincere desire for the personal freedom to acquire anything she wants without having to sell herself and suffer indignities. Here the Cuban state is held responsible for standing between individuals and the fuller and freer existence that they could have if it did not intervene. This line of reasoning is pragmatic. Democracy and the market, while not promising total equality between classes or the complete erasure of injustices, provide the best possible protection for individual freedom, especially if this freedom is understood as the freedom to vote, invest, trade and consume as one wishes.

"A demolished socialist utopia is superseded by a fantasy of an exclusive paradise of individuality." This is how Rogelio sums up the line of reasoning that motivates Marcovich's film. As I have been arguing, this is also the line of reasoning used by the TV Martí program in which it is reviewed. But if the host for TV Martí limits himself to using Ortega to lambaste Castro, then Marcovich expresses more clearly a second-phase modernization logic by equating

Ortega with Quiroz. As Rogelio points out, this gesture is not only predicated on the supposed physical and biographical resemblances between the two protagonists, but on an equivalence that Marcovich forces between prostitution, modeling and acting. In the cynical world of market values there are only differences of degree. The individual always markets and sells him or herself, no matter what else he or she does.

Even though Rogelio is critical of the Cuban regime, he criticizes Marcovich's film because he cannot accept this argument. What Marcovich misses is that quality is often at least partially a market externality. Ortega and Quiroz are not equivalent. It is as if Cuba is the Reservation of Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Ortega is John the Savage. The world of Ortega is tragic, marked by pain and suffering, but also richly complex and uniquely appealing. The world of Quiroz, by contrast, is one in which beauty is but skin deep. In struggling to distinguish themselves, giving expression to their freedom, individuals apparently perpetuate a system that turns out products of little quality.

Post-Mexicanness

In his book, Rogelio uses his critique of Marcovich and his film *Who the Hell is Juliette?* as a prologue for a wholesale critique of so-called New Mexican Cinema: "Complacent, inoffensive, trivial, and light... the directors of neomexican cinema learn quickly to film insipid *gringo* comedies in Mexico, and even road movies—while they prepare for and pray to be able to shoot in Hollywood."⁸² One Mexican director, Arturo Ripstein, has lamented that he is not as well received in Mexico as he is in other countries. "For many directors, the 'New' Mexican Cinema—like the Mexican genre of ska-pop-rock of the last fifteen years—is more than anything else an article of faith: You must support them unconditionally, whether they are terrible, bad, or just regular."⁸³ For Rogelio, Marcovich and Ripstein are both directors imitating the worst of foreign cinema. Why should it be that just because they are Mexican, Rogelio as a Mexican should have to like them? Just because they are well received outside of Mexico—to a large degree because they are Mexican and therefore a peculiar ethnic commodity—should he be proud of their success? If their movies are bad, they should be judged as bad, regardless of who they are, where they come from, or where their films are shot.

In the twelfth issue of *Replicante*, which was devoted to film, Rogelio included an interview of the prolific film critic Jorge Ayala Blanco by Naief Yehya, a writer on film and technology. In response to a question concerning recent films made overseas by Mexican directors, Ayala Blanco states, "As you already know, the mentality of Mexicans is to sell themselves and their nation to foreigners. The current slogan for film... is: 'First I think about overseas, then I exist.' The House of Representatives kneels before filmmakers who encounter success in Hollywood." These recent films made by Mexican directors in collaboration with foreign production companies, of which Ayala Blanco mentions *Babel* (2006), *El Laberinto del Fauno* (2006), and *Children of Men* (2006), "are barely films, and only with difficulty redeem themselves.... These films hide the misery in which national cinema lives."⁸⁴

82 Villarreal, *El dilema de Bukowski*, 143.

83 Ibid., 141.

84 The directors of these films are Alejandro González Iñárritu, Guillermo del Toro, and Alfonso Cuarón respectively. Yehya, "Nada me da más optimismo que el cine que producen algunos jóvenes mexicanos."

“But people have believed in the boom of Mexican cinema,” adds Naief, “not only in Mexico but overseas as well.” Contrary to those who would sing the praises of recent Mexican films, Rogelio, Naief, and Ayala Blanco all believe that the new wave in Mexican cinema has been overrated. What is positive about this overvaluation though, according to Ayala Blanco, is that other Mexican directors can benefit from the way that Mexico is becoming a sort of brand in world cinema.⁸⁵ For example, Carlos Reygadas has received international recognition even though he is pursuing a different aesthetic than the directors of the films mentioned.⁸⁶

In an interview, Reygadas answered questions regarding his aesthetic approach and method, what he sees as the difference between commercial and so-called third cinema, as well as the importance of Mexico in his work. Reygadas contrasts his method with those who appropriate theater practices for the making of film. “For me it shouldn't have anything to do with the theater method of character construction but unfortunately this is how the characters are constructed still in cinema today.” He gives the actors of his films no psychological or background information about their characters, but rather only “practical, spatial, temporal information.” The characters themselves emerge through editing and the cinematic process and are not, strictly speaking, performed by the actors themselves. The actors are not given screenplays to read and there are no rehearsals. They are not asked to express emotions. Reygadas believes “that a stronger kind of emotion can pass through if they don't express emotion.”⁸⁷

What is at the heart of this investigation is the way that Mexico as a nation figures into the self-construction of those who write and appear in contemporary writing in Mexico City, and how something that has been called the post-Mexican condition has emerged. Ayala Blanco, in criticizing the foreign-produced movies made by Mexican directors, is also making a statement of personal identity. By telling us that he likes the films of Carlos Reygadas and not *Babel*, the latest film by Alejandro González Iñárritu, he is not only dissecting the way that Mexico is becoming a brand in cinematic circles but making a statement of taste. And as Bourdieu taught, statements of taste function to distinguish, to survey the boundaries between those groups we belong to and those to which we don't, or don't want to.

When asked if he is an *auteur*, the type of director who creates works of art instead of commodities for mass consumption, Reygadas characterizes himself as follows: “I don't really consider myself anything although I do know that when they talk about our third cinema, as opposed to commercial cinema, for me it's the method that defines both.... Decisions for commercial films are taken to extract that big mucus called 'the viewer' - an abstraction that I believe doesn't exist - so you take decisions in order to please as many people as possible. The other method is deciding on your own tastes and your convictions.” Reygadas tells us what type of person and director he is by saying that he doesn't seek to please viewers as much as follow his own tastes and convictions. And since he is a Mexican, making films in Mexico, in part for international audiences, he is also defining what type of Mexican his methods make him.

Entrevista a Jorge Ayala Blanco,” 71.

85 Ibid.

86 Reygadas has directed the films *Japón* (2002), *Battle in Heaven* (2005), and *Silent Light* (2007).

87 Here Reygadas seems to be channeling Walter Benjamin: “For the film, what matters primarily is that the actor represents himself to the public before the camera, rather than representing someone else,” and then quoting an anonymous expert he continues, “the greatest effects are almost always obtained by ‘acting’ as little as possible.” Benjamin, “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,” 229-30.

“Mexico is very important but only because the films are set in Mexico. I am not a 'Mexicanist' if you like. If I had to emigrate to England then I would make films in England, I think. I would be interested in the same things but then England would be very important because I would try to be very loyal to the context.” What interests Reygadas are certain problems, methods, and characters, not Mexico as such. In his first film, *Japón*, he experimented with long takes, the act of looking through the camera, using it as a brush to fill a canvas with color. In his second film, *Battle in Heaven*, he explored montage, constructing narrative and characters through juxtaposition. As I already mentioned, he does not give scripts to his actors or asks them to enact roles. He creates immediacy by using little-known and non-professional actors and filming them in such a way that it is not so much their expressions and words that are important but what we feel we can read behind them. Benjamin would say that Reygadas uses actors without “aura” and his camera as a tool for continuously cutting through it. Mexico is palpable, more than in other films, not because Reygadas creates and represents typical Mexican characters or scenarios but because universal problems can only be explored through place and subjectively.

When watching *Battle in Heaven* you might feel transported to Mexico City, or when watching *Japón* and *Silent Light* you might feel transported to the Mexican countryside, but it won't be so much because you recognize landmarks or landscapes, or recognize the characters as ones that you already know. No. Reygadas protagonists are idiosyncratic and never quite typical. There is the painter who wanders out into the Mexican countryside and meets an old woman with whom a relationship blossoms just before he commits suicide, a Mexico City chauffeur torn over the death of the child that he and his wife kidnapped for ransom, and a rural man who against the law of God falls in love with a woman who is not his wife. These are not exactly stereotypical Mexican characters, nor are the landscapes. In *Silent Light*, for example, we encounter a Mexico where people speak Plautdietsch and a landscape covered in snow.

Reygadas was awarded the 2007 Jury Prize at Cannes Film Festival for *Silent Light*. In a television interview which followed his win, Reygadas mentions the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa as an example of a person who made films that in their “ultra-particularity” speak universally. “We are placed in a society that in fact many of us as Mexicans are not familiar with, we do not know the rituals, but in the end the films completely take us in.” Idiosyncrasies are not made into incommensurabilities but rather are presented as the always-necessary channels to any universal human drama. I wonder to what degree Reygadas' experience of Kurosawa's films as universal hinges on the fact that many of them were adaptations of works by European authors such as William Shakespeare, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, and some writers from the United States as well.

Whatever particularity and universality denote, it is in those terms, in the tension between them, that analysis of the Mexican character has gravitated for at least a century. Like Rogelio, Ayala Blanco, and Reygadas, each in their particular way, certain cosmopolitan intellectuals have always stressed the virtues of universality against those who would celebrate or lose themselves to particularity. Emblematic of this stance is a short essay by the writer Jorge Cuesta published in 1932. The essay, titled “Against Nationalism”, expresses a cosmopolitan frustration with those who would oblige Mexicans to value Mexican cultural products just because they are Mexican.

Cuesta argued: “A return to what is Mexican” is a call to arms that, in the work of a particular Mexican writer that Cuesta is criticizing, serves more “as a shield for mediocrity and the lack of

culture” than as a stimulus to excellence.

'The return to what is Mexican'... has not ceased being a European idea against Europe, an unpatriotic sentiment. However, it offers itself as nationalism, although it only understands as such the impoverishing of nationalism. Its most intimate feeling can be stated as follows: what is possessed is of value because it is possessed, not because it has any value beyond being possessed. In this way Mexican rags are not of less esteem than foreign riches because the value of our rags consists in that they are ours. It is the opportunity to value what each has, to value that which has no value. This is the opportunity of Mexican literature.

You have literature in France? We also have literature in Mexico. It is the same, but different.

For Cuesta, literature is “seduction, not a merit; a fervor, not slavery.” If it is good literature then it will seduce and continue to seduce the universal human being within each of us. Cuesta believed that a national literature that seeks to cultivate idiosyncrasies ends by belittling us, reducing us to what is peculiar to each of us:

Imagine a La Bruyère, a Pascal, dedicated to interpreting the French. They saw a man in the French and not an exception in the man. But Mexicans like Mr. Ermilio Abreu Gómez will only get confused when they discover that, as far as knowledge of Mexicans is concerned, a text by Dostoyevsky or Conrad is richer than any typical national novel; they will only get confused to find a man in the Mexican and not some lamentable exception of a man.

Cuesta, in stressing the quality of artistic productions over their national particularity, sounds quite a lot like Rogelio, Ayala Blanco, and Reygadas. This is possible, I believe, because Cuesta's critique of national particularism was written right at the time the PRI was first consolidating its corporatist structure and formulating its legitimizing national ideology. It would have been difficult to express such opinions during the 1940s, at the height of the so-called Mexican Miracle, or for decades after. Cuesta was critiquing a nationalism that was dawning, one in which “what is possessed is of value because it is possessed, not because it has any value beyond being possessed.” In a world where value is increasingly determined in international markets it is once again possible for Mexican intellectuals to call for judgments in terms of universal criteria.

Bourgeois Distinction

Ultimately, Reygadas' *Battle in Heaven* is not so different from Marcovich's *Who the Hell is Juliette?* One might consider them to be different, but they participate in the same game. Both films use nonprofessional actors, are part of a moment in media that we could describe by referring to the current popularity of reality television programming. Moreover, if the directors of these films distanced their work from more popular movies (Hollywood blockbusters, for example) they would only demonstrate to what degree they are in competition with them, and also dependent on them in order to be able to cut out for themselves an alternative niche.

After receiving his award for *Silent Light* at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, Reygadas said the following at the laureates' press conference: "It's a very important prize because it helps us blaze

a trail for other Mexican filmmakers and, even more, for filmmakers all over the world who are interested in a cinema which sometimes departs from the laws of total identification and clarification, a cinema that likes temporary ambiguity...”⁸⁸ All you need to do is browse various weblogs or movie reviews on the Internet that discuss his film to know exactly what he is talking about when he says that he participates in a cinema that departs from “laws of total... clarification,” and indulges in “temporary ambiguity.” The Jury Prize is a win for Reygadas, and filmmakers like him, in his struggle against those who are made uncomfortable by his long takes, who think the long silences in his films are pretentious, who would prefer a more conventional narrative, or grow impatient and have a hard time concentrating through the entire movie.

What is surprising in all of this is that Bourdieu is still so relevant, that he described so fully this dynamic in the field of cultural production:

Formal refinement—which, in literature or the theatre, leads to obscurity—is, in the eyes of the working class public, one sign of what is sometimes felt to be a desire to keep the uninitiated at arm’s length... to speak to other initiates ‘over the viewers’ heads’. It is part of the paraphernalia which always announces the sacred character, separate and separating, of high culture... a distancing, inherent in the calculated coldness of all formal exploration, a refusal to communicate concealed at the heart of the communication itself...

An aesthete, continues Bourdieu, “whenever he appropriates one of the objects of popular taste... introduces a distance, a gap... vis-à-vis ‘first degree’ perception, by displacing the interest from the ‘content’, characters, plot etc., to the form, to the specifically artistic effects.”

Science, like that of Bourdieu's sociology, however, has been celebrating its advantages over other forms of knowledge long enough now to allow artists time to regroup and develop arguments in their defense. In the quote above, Reygadas celebrates violating the law of total clarification. Earlier I quoted him describing how by not telling actors what emotions to express, a deeper emotion is created. Bourdieu critiques aesthetes like Reygadas for their “refusal to communicate” that they “concealed at the heart of the communication itself.” Reygadas defends himself against such arguments by saying something to the effect, “You know so little about how knowledge is conveyed, the emotion passed, the reality experienced in some moments of temporary ambiguity.” Art is not about communicating, after all, it is about experiencing.

Conclusion

Bourdieu has described a class game of one-upmanship. His reflections are pertinent to the point that they shed light on the dynamic that is involved in the creation of what I am calling post-Mexican. Bourgeois writers, unsurprisingly, have had a tendency to distinguish themselves by making appeals to universal (international) criteria of artistic value. Today, their judgments often turn against more commercial creations, particularly those that appeal to tastes popular to a broader or mass audience. This allows them, as Bourdieu points out, to feel themselves part of a more select group of initiates, those who are able to recognize creations of “authentic” value.

Mexicanness, as I will demonstrate more fully in the chapters to come, is predicated on a

88 <http://www.festival-cannes.fr/en/archives/film/4434938>

position of inferiority. The nationalist strategy, associated with the PRI, was to value all things Mexican precisely because they were Mexican and part of the official national narrative. Applied to the realm of arts, the logic of import-substitution industrialization meant that Mexican-produced literature and film should not only be fomented but valued precisely because they were Mexican productions. This valuation structure has eroded to the degree that today intellectuals such as Rogelio and Ayala Blanco can criticize Mexican creations when they fail to meet international standards of artistic quality.

Both Marcovich and Reygadas, as directors, are emblematic of post-Mexicanness. They transcend the strictly national system of valuation by making films for an international audience. Although their international recognition is a source of pride for some Mexicans, and although that recognition is based, to some extent, on the fact that they *are* Mexican, there is nothing essentially Mexican about their creations. As Reygadas said, the fact that he is Mexican is incidental. Being Mexican can be a ploy of self-promotion, one item in a list of individual attributes. In appealing to universal standards of quality, Rogelio and Ayala Blanco demonstrate to what degree they have moved beyond collective presuppositions and the old nationalist mode of judgment.

Chapter III: Writers No Longer Projecting National Unity

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a context for understanding contemporary writing in Mexico City. First, there is the failed developmental project. Given the economic history of Mexico in the twentieth century, it is difficult to imagine that the country will one day overcome the inequality and general lack of opportunities experienced by the majority of the population. The fragmenting of group interests parallels the differentiation of markets. Writers as well now operate under a market logic. Older genres, such as *testimonio*, that played to representative democratic politics have lost their reason for existing. Personal chronicle has emerged as a form more appropriate to consumer lifestyles. Mexicans are no longer unified by a national myth but by consumer desires. This is a logic not inconsistent with modern electoral democracy where voting and purchasing are made equivalent to the degree that they are both perceived as hinging on individual choice.

Failure of Developmentalism

Fanning sentiments of national belonging and common cause have over the past two centuries been an effective method of galvanizing populations against colonial rule. It is no coincidence that national literature appeared in the colonies at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁸⁹ After independence, however, this unifying sentiment became the object of calculated management by successive governments. That is, what was used to feed popular insubordination against foreign rulers and colonizers became a legitimizing mechanism for nation-states.

Although postcolonial literature continues to be a frame for research on the literature of former colonies, it has little merit for countries like Mexico, which has been independent for nearly two centuries. Postnational literature, by comparison, is more applicable. It points to the fact that in many countries literature is no longer a ward of the state; that it draws on diverse and opposing traditions; it appears in widely differing styles, genres and argots; and is targeted to niche audiences. In other words, the state is no longer literature's crucial patron. Nor is the nation, a particular imagined community of individuals, its primary subject matter.

In the long violent history of Mexico three decades stand out for their relative stability, having experienced no major economic or political crises, and for the widespread optimism that permeated them. Known as the Mexican Miracle, the period runs from 1940 to 1968. After the civil war, running from 1910 up through the 1920s, a peculiar clientelist political apparatus was put into place. It regularized for the first time the system of presidential succession and through it a policy of import-substitution industrialization was implemented. Thanks to the latter, the Mexican government was able to take advantage of increased exports during and after the Second World War, which supported the growth of domestic industries and institutions.

Mid-twentieth century economic growth in Mexico, however, was less than spectacular.⁹⁰ Developmentalism, the political philosophy used by governments across Latin America to legitimize the exercise of power, also made them responsible for the soundness of their country's economy. Authoritarian measures were perceived as legitimate as long as a government kept

⁸⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflecting on the origin and spread of nationalism*.

⁹⁰ The rate of annual growth in GDP was between 2 and 3 percent.

capital and resources in national hands, invested in domestic industries, and appeared to be providing conditions for the general well-being of the population. The public embraced developmentalism because it promised to be a path by which to improve a country's standing among nations as well as overcome gross disparities in wealth, access to institutions and resources.

It was only a matter of time, however, before it became apparent that import substitution and developmentalist economic policies were not going to come anywhere near meeting popular expectations. During the Mexican Miracle, growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had been stable around a modest two to three percent. In the 1970s, it began to oscillate between zero and eight percent. Growth in GDP, if averaged over the years from 1973 to 2008, has been little more than one percent per year, a truly unimpressive rate.⁹¹ Even more telling, income inequality, as measured by the Gini Index, has remained high.⁹²

Beginning in the 1960s, Mexican intellectuals began to roundly criticize authoritarian rule, seeing in it the root of their country's woes. If only Mexico could become truly democratic, they argued, a more equitable distribution of resources and welfare would necessarily follow. But democracy, as championed by critics of the single-party regime, has been a long time in coming. In 2000, the official party, which had been in power for over seventy years, was finally voted out. Elections, which used to be charades in which local authorities and official worker and peasant unions delivered votes for candidates selected by the president, are now as clean and competitive as in any electoral democracy. Moreover, the current administration is doing more to eliminate corruption, particularly that caused by drug trafficking, than any before it.

Escalating violence, more than 10,800 drug war-related deaths between 2006 and 2009, and the repeated success of drug cartels to infiltrate the highest levels of government, however, have contributed to serious doubts about whether the current campaign against corruption in Mexico will ultimately be successful.⁹³ How can Mexico clean up its act when, in the face of the current recession and falling exports, illegal drugs continue to be such a lucrative trade? Even more to the point, after decades of developmentalism, replaced in the 1980s by a trickle-down ideology, the divide between those who have and those who have not has only been exacerbated. Who believes any longer that economic policies are capable of transforming Mexico into a country with a large middle class and levels of social mobility on par with nations of the first world? The optimistic projections of first-wave modernization have been tempered by reality.⁹⁴

Since the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in 1994, a consensus has emerged among urban intellectuals spanning the political spectrum. Whether from the Left or Right, critics of the government now supports greater transparency and democracy, and have newfound moral fervor against corruption.⁹⁵ Since the late 1990s, however, no workable elaborated proposal on how to overcome systemic inequality has been put forward. The World Bank suggests that the Mexican government could use social protection policy—pensions, social

91 Maddison and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., *The world economy*; Shane, *Real Per Capita Income (2005 US dollars) Historical*.

92 Luxembourg Income Study (Organization), *Luxembourg income study*.

93 Bogan et al., "The Next Disaster"; Associated Press, "7 mayors charged in Mexico drug probe."

94 See the discussion of first and second-wave modernization in Chapter I.

95 Van Delden, "Conjunciones y Disyunciones: La rivalidad entre Vuelta y Nexos."

security, and healthcare—to better redistribute benefits. However, very little redistribution is possible, it concludes, without greater and sustained economic growth.⁹⁶

But even if by some stroke of good fortune Mexico was able to attain higher levels of growth and implemented an aggressive redistributive social policy there is essentially no hope that anything more than minor gains can be expected with respect to poverty and inequality. Forty percent of the population is consistently classified as living below the poverty line and Mexico's Gini scores, an index of economic inequality, have never remained for any extended period below fifty.⁹⁷ Based on concrete data and historical tendencies, it is difficult, if not impossible to imagine that Mexico will ever become as egalitarian as Japan, Canada, or any European country.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, someone might have used Marxian Crisis Theory to argue that it was in the best interests of subaltern classes to wreck havoc on capitalist accumulation. Today, however, nobody has the heart to ask Mexicans to suffer and sacrifice more than they already have in order to bring about the fantasy of a Utopian egalitarian state. Marxism is no longer a dominant critical frame, in part because unions for so long have been instruments of the official party. As well, the option of violent revolutionary action now appears to be exhausted..

Indicative of the situation, presidential candidates have abandoned putting economic policy front and center, only promising in the vaguest terms collective prosperity as a way of managing popular expectations. Take for instance the policy proposals made by the left-of-center candidate for the 2006 elections. He suggested constitutional changes in order to better confront corporate monopolies and their influence on politicians. He spoke of increasing “freedom of information”. He proposed a law of “competitive pricing” that would reduce what Mexicans pay for Internet and cellular phone service, as well as credit card fees. He promised to ask the government of Mexico City to prevent a rise in the price of milk. He said he would review all credit and building contracts made by state enterprises. He would establish a “truth commission” to investigate past financial fiascos. He would ask Congress to review the tax code. He would oppose the privatization of the state petroleum and electric companies as well as sales taxes on medicine and food. Finally, he would make the fight against corruption a constitutional obligation, and the “trafficking of influence” with politicians a crime.

Except for price controls, there is no direct action proposed for redistribution of wealth or reduction of inequality.⁹⁸ For example, Andrés Manuel López Obrador proposed to deal with corporate monopolies, corruption and lobbying by amending the Constitution. Unfortunately, however, changing the Constitution in Mexico guarantees very little. Notice that he did not suggest any way that Mexico could improve its terms of trade with its principal partners, the United States and Canada, nor did he propose a plan for creating jobs. His proposals were in essence based on moral rather than economic principles. By doing so he has effectively conceded that there is very little that the Mexican president can do to better the economic situation for the

96 The World Bank Group, *Mexico 2006-2012: Creating the foundations for equitable growth*.

97 A Gini score of 100 represents perfect inequality, and a score of zero perfect equality. In order to give some context, Mexico's Gini score has been historically above that of China and India, and the scores for all OECD countries, except the United States, are all lower than 40. By all comparisons, over the twentieth century Mexico has been a highly unequal country.

98 One company, TELMEX, has, in effect, a monopoly on telephone and Internet services in Mexico.. Under these circumstances, it could be imagined that price controls would serve to redistribute revenues to clients.

majority of Mexicans.

In lambasting a system that benefits those with money and political influence to the detriment of the majority of the population, López Obrador was but reiterating what is popular wisdom in a country where politicians become rich while in office and those in business increase their wealth by entering into alliance with them. Present in the collective imagination of a country where people die of starvation and curable diseases is the case of Carlos Slim. In 2007 the Mexican businessman was declared the world's wealthiest man, with an estimated worth of more than \$60 billion.⁹⁹ Slim made a significant portion of his wealth in 1990 when he purchased majority shares in the state-run telephone company for what many considered less than market value through his association with then president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. In stating, "A government divorced from society is nothing more than a facade," López Obrador, in alluding to the way that current administrations benefit business, appears to have been hearkening back to what understandably now appears as a golden age when a clientelist political structure made the government relatively more responsive to the demands of working class Mexicans.¹⁰⁰

In the mid-twentieth century, during a relatively more stable economic period, the federal government legitimized its exercise of power through developmentalism. Beginning in the 1980s, a series of technocratic administrations built their promises on a free market ideology. Today, however, it is professional ethics, personal accountability, and the fight against informal and illegal commercial activities that constitute the dominant legitimizing paradigm. In current news, for example, coverage of the war on drug trafficking trumps that of the economic recession.

The difference between the previous economic-centric legitimizing ideologies and the new moral imperative against corruption is that the latter offers no credible mechanism for reducing poverty or inequality. Although the anti-corruption campaign is certainly necessary to encourage foreign investments, the elimination of corruption, if that is even possible in Mexico given the high and continuing demand for illegal drugs in the United States, does not in itself guarantee a more egalitarian distribution of benefits.¹⁰¹

Previous administrations have been quite successful at selling the country as an attractive investment destination without significantly undercutting the illegal drug trade or investing in social protection policies. Furthermore, the drug trade generates jobs and wealth for Mexicans. It is no secret that for the majority of Mexicans, their best chance for social mobility is found in the informal and illegal sectors of the economy. By escalating the war on drugs, the current president, Felipe Calderon, is effectively increasing the cost of doing business in Mexico. This is true even for legal business enterprises which now must spend more on protection and security services. As investment capital shrinks throughout the world, remittances from Mexicans working abroad decline, and as those trading in contraband and narcotics are squeezed by the government and slaughter each other, it is but yet again the hopes of many Mexicans for a better life that grow dim.

99 Navaer, "NAFTA Made a Mexican the World's Richest Man."

100Becerril and Urrutia, "AMLO se compromete a defender al pueblo y la soberanía nacional."

101For a recent, sober assessment of the war on drug cartels in Mexico, see Salam, "The Mexican Insurgency."

Writers Between State and Market

It is important that I begin this dissertation by conveying some contours of the difficult panorama facing Mexicans today. Hardship is certainly not new. What has changed, however, is the degree to which optimism about the collective future of Mexicans has become impossible. The myth of national unity that presided over the Mexican Miracle has been exhausted. If for a few decades in the mid-twentieth century it appeared that the country might achieve a general level of wellbeing, and that hope was periodically revived—notably during the Salinas de Gortari administration in the early 1990s—today the multiple fissures separating Mexicans have become glaringly evident, and appear insurmountable.

As Jean-Paul Sartre explained, although writers have predominately come from the bourgeoisie, because of peculiarities of their *métier*, they are unclassed and free to align themselves with other groups.¹⁰² Traditionally, scribes and men of letters have been in the service of the aristocracy and other elites, expected to hold a mirror up to them as it were. This has been true in Mexico City, where for centuries writers have been confined to social circles far removed from the majority of the population. What was unique about the Mexican Miracle was the degree to which writers felt compelled to assume an obligation toward the interests of the majority of citizens. It matters little here if this obligation was rhetorical, adhering to the formulaic “revolutionary” ideology of the state, or more substantive, as in the case of what Sartre called engaged writers.

Whatever the nature of the collective bond evoked through writing, the point is that it is no longer possible, at least not in the same way. The myth of national unity, which writers elaborated and diffused, no longer is compelling. It perhaps has always been true that writers labor for niche markets, what is different today is that writers no longer imagine that they are writing for a national reader in general, but are more conscious of the restricted group that may read their works. This is no less true for writers in solidarity with particular social movements than it is for writers who celebrate the triumph of consumer choice. No mechanism is being proposed that specifically addresses how to attain the old liberal ideal of a relatively well-educated and predominately middle class citizenry, much less a proletarian dictatorship.

In Chapter V I give an account of how writers, beginning in the 1960s in Mexico City, came to move against the tradition of national literature and to write in an inward-looking, rebellious, and self-absorbed style reminiscent of the beatniks. Those who are inclined to explain this development in terms of the Cold War would to a large degree be correct. The CIA-funded journals in Latin America championed artistic freedom over Soviet-sponsored revolutionary commitments. As Jean Franco explains, “There is more to this than conspiracy theory. In the United States itself, the turn from public art to abstract expressionism, from a politicized avant-garde to a depoliticized avant-garde art, from realist to experimental writing (a turn that was never absolute or all-embracing), was based on claims for artistic autonomy.”¹⁰³ What she says about artistic autonomy is also true for intellectual freedom more generally. Octavio Paz and other independent-minded writers vaunted their autonomy in the 1970s and 1980s by criticizing socialist regimes and the Mexican Left. Furthermore, argues Franco, the Cold War had the effect of devaluing the role of writers in society, privileging communication over art even while

¹⁰²Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 94-6.

¹⁰³Franco, *The decline and fall of the lettered city*, 2.

continuing to finance literary production.¹⁰⁴

The shift that I describe in Chapter V, from the nationally engaged writing of the mid-twentieth century to the rebellious and self-absorbed writing in Mexico City beginning in the 1970s, is a crucial one. As Franco points out, “Conspiracy theories that only take into account North American intervention can never account for a writer’s disaffection from left-wing cultural politics, for that disaffection was in many cases a tacit rejection of the rigidity of Soviet-inspired aesthetics.”¹⁰⁵ In Mexico it was also a rejection of the rigidity of the one-party state, its failed developmentalism, and the official national revolutionary aesthetic that it pushed and financed. It certainly could be said that writers such as José Agustín from La Onda movement, starting from the 1970s, wrote in an “American style”. But to place too much emphasis on this point would be to miss the degree to which their writing responded to endogenous circumstances.

In 1971, Agustín and José Revueltas befriended each other while incarcerated in Lecumberri, the renowned Mexico City penitentiary. Franco describes their encounter as a passing of the literary torch between two generations, that of the mid-century and the late-century generation. It is emblematic that Revueltas, the now elderly but still engaged leftist, was in prison for his political commitments while the young Agustín was doing time for drug possession. While Revueltas had belonged to the Communist Party, “Agustín claimed to have been liberated by rock music. He belonged to a youth culture that had experimented with drugs and that shared the freer sexual mores of the hippy life-style.”¹⁰⁶ Through the 1970s and 1980s, the old ethos of duty and party-enforced discipline gave way to a voluntarist aesthetic of personal rebellion. Members of the group to which Agustín belonged defined their identity through rock music and the consumption of drugs, an indication of the degree to which personal consumption had become the principal modality by which even nonconformity was channeled. Cold War anticommunists had succeeded at least in this, to make the logic of individual freedom indistinguishable from the personal liberty promised by free markets.¹⁰⁷

As long ago as the 1960s, Carlos Fuentes complained, “We are up to our necks in the rat race, we are submerged like any gringo or Frenchman in the world of competition and status symbols, the world of neon lights and Sears-Roebuck and washing machines, the films of James Bond and Campbell soup cans.” Even when people choose to rebel against that world they do so by consuming alternative or nonconformist branded merchandise and services. “While the Left wanted to replace literature with politics and idealistically thought it possible to resist the influence of the market,” explains Franco, “the defenders of cultural freedom welcomed the apparently democratic culture of the marketplace while wishing to retain their privilege as trendsetters.”¹⁰⁸ As it stands today, however, literary writers have lost a political framework from which to wholly resist the influence of the market as well as the modernist pedestal from which to critique mass and popular culture. Mass communication technologies have proved too influential, crowding out literature, robbing writers of their leadership function that Fuentes desired for them to retain in a world saturated by commodities.

104Ibid., 2-3.

105Ibid., 4.

106Ibid., 182.

107Ibid., 56.

108Ibid., 50.

In a city that loves to watch television, listen to the radio, connect to the Internet, as being inundated by a surfeit of print, what role does literature play? I do not attempt a general answer to this question, but I do propose that literature in Mexico City grapples with consumer and heavily mass mediated lifestyles. For Franco, literary writers during the Cold War in Latin America “were ambiguously situated, participating in state power and standing in opposition to it.” In this sense they mirrored the ambiguity of the state itself, as both an “agent of modernization yet dependent, bearing the hope of national autonomy while practicing exclusions and repressions.”¹⁰⁹ I propose that what was true with respect to the state during the Cold War is true today with respect to the market.

In Chapter VI, I describe a shift in the management philosophy applied in support of cultural production. Whereas the culture industries used to dictated according to national objectives, today the state has adopted a market ideology of maximizing profits and “efficiencies” in its financing of television, cinema, and literature.¹¹⁰ In this way, contemporar writers in Mexico City are “ambiguously situated”, not so much with respect to the state as with respect to the logic of competitive markets. In the 1960s and 1970s, fiction in Latin America, argues Franco, often traced “the limits beyond which the state's determination of what amounts to truth and justice [was] dissipated or nullified.”¹¹¹ While the state continues to be a major supporter of the literary field, in adopting a market rationale it no longer influences writers in a way that would foment an official discourse of national unity. This leaves creative and intellectual production, so necessary for imagining community, ever more dependent on the so-called laws of supply and demand. Given the shift of terrain, from the state to the market, it is no surprise that fiction writers have now turned to exploring the limits of market logic, or those characters who fail to act in ways sanctioned or valued by markets.

Because of their ambiguous relationship with the state, intellectuals were well situated for exploring its limits. This is nothing more than a particular case of what Sartre identified as the divided loyalty of writers. He thought that writers did not earn a living, not as the aristocracy, capitalists or workers do. Therefore, their interests are not the same. As Sartre put it, the “writer is not paid; he is fed.”¹¹² Unlike a wage, being fed allows a certain intimate access to the patron class, an honorary membership as it were. However, since writing often requires one to keep a distance from the chosen subject, and since writers often consider themselves superior to their patrons, they may come to resent the concessions they must make for room and board. If it used to be with respect to the state that writers had a divided allegiance, it is now increasingly with respect to the market. The literary debate around quality, for example, is a good place to see that market value is never coterminous with literary value.¹¹³ Due to the extent that writers are dependent on literary markets today, it is important for them to establish the value of their work outside of market logic and to explore in their writing those areas where that logic breaks down.

There are two principle strategies by which literary writers pursued the limits of the state and by which they now explore and push the limits of market-appropriate ideology—consumerism. The

109Ibid., 123.

110Sánchez Ruiz, “Los Medios de Comunicación Masiva en México, 1968-2000,” 429-47.

111Franco, *The decline and fall of the lettered city*, 123.

112Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 75.

113For a summary of these debates in Mexico, see Anderson, “Aesthetic Criteria and the Literary Market in Mexico: The changing shape of Quality, 1982-1994,” 222.

first is in writing about marginalized characters who are more conventionally repressed or excluded. Franco, in her study of Latin American literature, explains how in writing about a “world turned upside down,” writers assumed an anti-state function, pushing the excluded and marginalized to the center.¹¹⁴ They did this, of course, not only for the authoritarian and developmentalist state but also with respect to paternalistic political organizations of the Left, particularly those under the sway of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. Today the same strategy holds for challenging the limits of the market. By writing about characters who live on the margins of the formal economy, writers are able to demonstrate how the presuppositions of that economy fall apart, thereby serving an anti-market function at the same time that they continue to participate in it by marketing themselves and their works.

The second strategy that has been effective at showing the limits of the state and the market is to write about crime. It is when the distinction between lawmaking and law-preserving violence is suspended, posited Walter Benjamin, that one can see that there is “something rotten in the law” that legitimizes state rule.¹¹⁵ The police and criminals become indistinguishable the moment they resort to violence. It is no accident that during a period in Latin America characterized by authoritarianism, writers began exploring crime as a literary subject. By doing so they were able to demonstrate the extent to which the state itself was violently criminal. Similarly, crime as a subject is today effective in revealing the rotten underbelly, as it were, of the marketplace. It is not only that in places like Mexico the informal and criminal economy is often the only route by which people have access to certain commodities and services. In fact, the “liberty” and self-actualization promised by “free” and “democratic” markets is itself continually provisioned for through the forceful and often criminal dispossession of weaker competitors.

In Chapter III I compare and contrast the anti-market function of some recent literature in Mexico City with the market-affirming function of writing published in urban lifestyle magazines. Although not always explicit, this is the critical axis that underlies this project. My hypothesis is that these two forms of writing express two distinct solutions to a common problem faced by contemporary Mexicans. The problem is that developmentalism and supply-side economics have failed to create a more egalitarian society, one that offers greater opportunities to a wider swathe of society. Although critics agree that authoritarianism, corruption, and the oligarchic hold that a small group of businessmen and allied politicians have on the country should be done away with, there is no more than ad hoc measure proposed to deal with this specific issue or the other.

In the 2006 elections, the left-of-center candidate, as earlier mentioned, proposed to make monopolies and lobbying constitutionally illegal and to impose price controls to lower the prices for some commodities and services. The right-of-center candidate, upon winning the presidency, launched a campaign against corruption and drug trafficking. Intellectuals, for their part, no matter how critical of the status quo they may be, have made only generalized calls for greater democratization and transparency, as well as calling for the continued dismantling of centralized and authoritarian control. Denise Dresser, to name one, is an outspoken critic of the monopolistic and crony capitalism of the Mexican economy. However, no matter how you formulate the proposed changes—constitutional amendments, price controls, more ethical government

¹¹⁴Franco, *The decline and fall of the lettered city*, 123.

¹¹⁵Benjamin and Arendt, *Illuminations*, 286.

officials, and more open markets—they do not begin to directly address the drastic discrepancies of wealth and access, or the worsening economy.

Two Contemporary Responses

Contemporary writers now adopt one of two positions in relation to the broader society. As a writer, one can embrace a market ideology, specifically that capitalist work and consumption offer personal self-realization, or one can write against the celebratory vein of that ideology by evoking an almost perverse voyeuristic fidelity to chronicling widespread dissolution and depravity.

Nowhere is the writer as marketer more evident than in lifestyle magazines. Not only do contributors to these periodicals often write complementary copy, that is articles and items that covertly push specific products and services, but in writing about lifestyles they reveal them as specific compendiums of consumer choices. Furthermore, urban magazines reveal the city as a collection of theaters, restaurants, bars, cafés, shopping centers, boutiques, and other consumer venues and events.¹¹⁶ In these magazines, as I illustrate in Chapter III, anything that might spoil the upbeat tone is specifically excluded. As one editor told me, crime, corruption, congested roads, street children and pollution do not sell. More correctly, these subjects do not sell urban lifestyle magazines to their target niche.

In fact, crime, corruption, and violence do sell. It is just that they appeal to different tastes. From the extremely popular police genre of the sensationalist periodicals pedaled on streets everywhere in Mexico City (*nota roja*), with their gruesome displays of death and gore, to the gritty and apocalyptic fiction that I will make reference to, morbid pleasures are fed and partially satiated by writers. But then, there are also lifestyle magazines with their upbeat tone appealing to more celebratory takes on the city. The two broad affective veins for print in Mexico City are the carefree and the sordid. They do not respond necessarily to class tastes. Just as many copies of *Chilango*, an glossy urban lifestyle magazine, for example, are sold in working-class neighborhoods of Mexico City as in affluent ones. It makes no difference that one class may read the magazine for aspirational purposes, while another to better navigate the privileged pecuniary world to which they more properly belong. What is being sold and purchased is the consumerist promise of personal happiness and fulfillment, that is always, no matter who you are, mostly postponed. Moreover, if you group together the lurid content of the widely popular periodicals with the “high” literature that also gloomily evokes Mexico City, then taste for the dismal cuts across class lines too. These two attitudes are less the product of the socioeconomic standing of individuals than the failure of a collective project the stated aim of which was to overcome those class divisions and provide a generalized level of wellbeing.

Testimonial Realism

I privilege the literary genre that Anke Birkenmaier identifies as “dirty realism” because it is through this genre that writers most directly confront today a depressing situation.¹¹⁷ Throughout the Cold War, intellectuals were expected to support one side or the other. More than a decade

¹¹⁶Greenberg, “Branding Cities: A social history of the urban lifestyle magazine,” 228-63.

¹¹⁷Birkenmaier, “Dirty Realism at the End of the Century: Latin American apocalyptic fictions.”

after the collapse of the East Bloc, many writers are loath to embrace ideology or political positions, considering it a matter of professional responsibility to avoid joining political movements. They are committed, instead, to identifying the shortcomings of political and social movements, no matter how well meaning their supporters might be. The ethic today is, “If an intellectual joins the government, takes up arms, or speaks defending the narrow interests of other parties, he or she should not be considered an intellectual.”¹¹⁸

It could be countered, however, that not all writers today assume this “professional” detachment from politics. During the last presidential election, the left-of-center candidate and former mayor of Mexico City, López Obrador, received the endorsement of many intellectuals. It could be said that they came out and defended the “narrow interests” of his party. Among them were Elena Poniatowska and Carlos Monsiváis. They are both from the Generation of 1968, writers who participated with or were sympathetic to the student movement that ended in the massacre at Tlatelolco. Today they are among the few who preside over the literary establishment. They also belong to what Jorge Volpi has called the last generation to be “politically committed.”¹¹⁹

To illustrate the changes that have occurred within the world of letters with respect to politics, I will turn briefly to Poniatowska, who is perhaps the best known politically committed writer in Mexico today. Her most famous novel is *Here's to You, Jesusa!* Published in 1969, and almost continuously in print ever since, the book tells the story of a compelling woman who experienced the unrest and transformative events of the first half of the twentieth century. This novel was an early contribution to the genre known as *testimonio* (or testimonial literature); the controversial nonfiction work *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian woman in Guatemala* edited by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, was a later addition. In part because of the international profile the book gave her, Rigoberta Menchu received a Nobel Peace Prize for her work on behalf of other Native Americans. *Testimonio* is a political genre to the degree that it is used as a vehicle for giving voice to the voiceless. These two books are written entirely in the first person. While one is a novel and the other is a heavily edited transcript of interviews, both read as monologues in which the protagonists recount their life story.

From a political-representational perspective, in giving voice only to one person, and not to entire groups or social movements, these works are limited. Poniatowska attempted to overcome this shortcoming to the form by juxtaposing a multiplicity of voices in some of her subsequent works. In *Massacre in Mexico*, Poniatowska overlaid the stories of dozens of people she interviewed. They were students, their families and professionals who took part in the events surrounding the massacre at Tlatelolco. In *Nothing, Nobody: The voices of the Mexico City earthquake*, similarly it is through the dense tapestry of voices and perspectives that one gains access to what Monsiváis called “society organizing itself.”¹²⁰ In the face of the incompetent governmental response to the 1985 disaster, residents in the capital mobilized themselves to procure and distribute aid as well as rebuild their neighborhoods. Poniatowska evokes the popular effervescence of the moment, inspiring her readers with a belief in the goodness of people and their ability to reach out and together confront delinquent authorities and difficult situations.

118Volpi, “The End of the Conspiracy: Intellectuals and Power in 20th-Century Mexico,” 153.

119Ibid., 150.

120Monsiváis, *Entrada libre. Crónicas de la sociedad que se organiza* (Biblioteca Era / Era Library).

Not surprisingly, Poniatowska turns to the same multi-vocal strategy when she documents the mass mobilization instigated by López Obrador after he officially lost the presidential elections in 2006 by only just over one half of one percent. For weeks, his supporters came from far and wide to protest what they believed to be electoral fraud, blocking principal avenues and camping out in the Constitutional Plaza, the Zócalo. In *Dawn in the Zocalo: The 50 Days That Confronted Mexico*, Poniatowska quotes the candidate saying, “Maybe I will not be able to be president, but what gives me the greatest pride is that I represent humble people in Mexico.... I have struggled twenty years for a true democracy.” Then there are the voices of his supporters who marched the five kilometers along avenue Reforma, among them six people in wheelchairs. One of them is recorded as saying, “We are not going to let them rob us of hope.” A woman, upon seeing the candidate himself, exclaimed, “I love him more than Pope John Paul.”¹²¹

Though Poniatowska was the most prominent intellectual supporter of López Obrador, her book does not necessarily read as a rosy endorsement of him and his movement. Is it even possible today to write critically acclaimed literature in the romantic and un-nuanced vein that used to be favored by the politically committed? One enthusiastic reviewer celebrates the fact that “*Dawn in the Zocalo* interweaves, with its mountain of voices, one of the most substantiated critiques of López Obrador and our Left...”¹²² Most telling, however, is what Poniatowska reveals about herself in the book. She is not naive. She realizes that she was never an integral part of the campaign, that the candidate sought to use her endorsements of him at rallies and on television to fulfill his political ambitions.

Reflecting back on the events, she writes, “I learned more from the multitude about love and compassion, disinterest and sacrifice than everything I have learned in the world of appearances.” She misses the cooperative spirit of the people who took over Constitutional Square, a spirit she also found among Mexico City’s residents after the earthquake of 1985. The nostalgia that sweeps over her, even though she does not call it that, is clearly evident in the way that she uses the possessive adjective “our” in looking back on the experience. But the world of grassroots’ organizing and mass cohabitation is not entirely to her liking. “I am inclined to solitude,” she writes, “even though it tears me apart.” She is a writer. She is glad to go back to learning about what is happening in the country via her favorite journalists. Furthermore, she personally has little in common with the masses she writes about. She is European royalty, a princess, after all. Her solidarity with and commitments to progressive social mobilization in Mexico is certainly as authentic and perhaps even more deep felt than with many. However, by describing the black tea in the white tea cup with the “delicate napkin” that accompanies her as she writes, she marks a distance between her and those others who filled Constitutional Square drinking *atole*, cheap coffee, and soft drinks.

Poniatowska is detached enough to realize that she was merely and instrument for the presidential candidate and that the convivial cooperation that occurred among his supporters in the Zócalo was only a momentary manifestation of goodwill. She is also aware enough of the current political and economic situation in Mexico to know, at least belatedly, that there was really never all that much at stake in the elections, not really. She concludes her account: “We are a million people willing to put forward our bodies every time that we are called to stop an abuse,

¹²¹Poniatowska, “Amanecer en el Zócalo [Excerpts].”

¹²²Aranda Luna, “Amanecer en el Zócalo [Review].”

a privatization, a fraud.” It pleases her to count herself among the million. There is still power to be felt in numbers. However, stopping abuses, privatizations and protesting governmental frauds is not at the same level as the objectives of former struggles. Poniatowska knows this. The expectations that the candidate and his supporter so ardently raised were nebulous at best. They provided an emotional solution to a politically and economically irresolvable situation.

Although Poniatowska continues to be a bestselling author, she is criticized from many fronts. Today her political commitments often appear as little more than poses. In as much as her widely publicized endorsement of López Obrador made her latest book attractive to the millions of Mexicans who supported the candidate, was it not also an effective marketing stunt? In 1989, Enrique Serna published a novel about the literary scene in Mexico City.¹²³ It is in part a denunciation of the viciousness with which writers compete for literary recognition and tear each other apart. In it, a thinly disguised Poniatowska appears. The plot consists of the protagonist investigating the murder of a writer. He at first naively believes in the goodness of the Poniatowska character, in her defense of the defenseless. In a moment of desperation he resolves to approach her for assistance. However, as he gets nearer, enters into her inner social circle, he discovers that she is as Machiavellian and vengeful as everyone else. Her politics is but a front.

As I will demonstrate in Chapter VI, it is common younger writers should attack Poniatowska as a way of breaking in on the Mexican republic of letters of which she continues to be a prominent member. I describe this dynamic in greater detail in Chapter Five. Their critique of her, however, is not simply functional, but substantive as well. For a generation of writers that were not old enough to experience the social movements of the 1960s, her lens for interpreting current events rings false. The masses from whom she says she learned so much about “love and compassion, disinterest and sacrifice” are also uneducated, resentful and miserable. The woman who said that she loves López Obrador more than Pope John Paul is not looking for a real flesh-and-blood politician with concrete programs as much as a messiah who will usher in an era of righteousness.

Beginning in the 1990s, the group of writers at the center of this dissertation began to cut through the ideological filters deeded them by an earlier generation, filters that sought to give the misery of the present a sheen of purpose and meaning. The new generation of writers, no longer interested in ideology, sought refuge in literary technique and black humor. In describing the founding of the journal *A sangre fría*, Servín writes, “We began to give form to the project by recruiting friends who, regardless of their disillusionment... resisted through arts and letters a reality that is simply fucked up.”¹²⁴ An associate adds, referring to this and a similar periodical, “They are therapeutic publications, that thanks to their seeing misfortune without so much drama... soften the impact of the true or fictional news item... so that it does not hurt as much.”

¹²⁵

I am not as interested in how grisly and darkly comic writing ameliorates perceptions of a gruesome reality as much as how it works against the hegemony of the market and its triumphalism. In “focusing on the dark—or dirty—side of their present societies,” writes Birkenmaier, “on the life of adolescent hit men and vagabonds, drug trafficking and violence,

¹²³Serna, *El miedo a los animales*.

¹²⁴Servín, “Amarillismo de fondo,” vii.

¹²⁵Bares, “¡Se los llevó la chingada!,” v.

and a political situation that often verges on chaos and civil war,” writers across Latin America set in motion a machine that trace the limits of an increasingly decadent free-market ideology.¹²⁶ Servín writes, “Crime news, morbidity and frivolity open up for us possibilities to mock and confront the cultural environment and the monopoly of print and television media, both equally sterile, sectarian, intolerant and patriarchal.”¹²⁷

Writing in the first person and an autobiographical mode, writers placate market demands for authenticity. However, in insisting on writing literary chronicle instead of much more marketable nonfiction, biographies, memoirs and testimonies, these writers are also refusing to capitulate completely, insisting on a marginal relationship to the market.¹²⁸ This move is ethical to the degree that it puts front and center the question of how, given the strictures of the present, one can reflect on and best live one’s own life. The emerging generation, in its writing choices, has rejected representational politics. These days communication technologies facilitate multiple voices. The problem is no longer one of giving voice to the voiceless, as it was for testimonial literature, but in sorting through the idiocy and chatter which has become so prevalent.

The Chronicle Form

In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White turns to Hegel’s account of the emergence of historical narrative, writing, “It is the state that first presents a subject matter that not only is adapted to the prose of history but involves the production of such history in the very progress of its own being.”¹²⁹ By this formulation, there was no historical writing before the state existed.¹³⁰ The state is both the object of history and the actor that demands history be written as part of its own unfolding. A historical narrative consists of “inaugurations, transitions, and terminations of processes that are meaningful because they manifest the structures” of a plot in which the state figures as principle protagonist.¹³¹

According to this conception, chronicle is a less developed form than history writing. It is a “first-order symbolization of temporality” that does not attain the “deeper recognition of the level of temporality, which Ricoeur calls the ‘experience of historicity.’”¹³² To the degree that Hegel is correct, and the state is the proper subject matter of history, this “deeper... ‘experience of historicity’” must be an experience of the temporality of the state. In other words, chronicle, as a “first-order symbolization,” does not recognize as a form the temporality of the state. It should then come as no surprise that literature in Latin America that has been directed against the violence and authoritarianism of the state has often appeared as “artistic” chronicle.¹³³ The persistence and resurgence of the chronicle form in Mexico can be understood as an indication of the tenuousness of the state, even given its authoritarianism, its inability to impose itself on

126Birkenmaier, “Dirty Realism at the End of the Century: Latin American apocalyptic fictions,” 489.

127Servín, “Amarillismo de fondo,” vii.

128Birkenmaier, “Dirty Realism at the End of the Century: Latin American apocalyptic fictions,” 490-1.

129White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative discourse and historical representation*, 29.

130 Although as an anthropologist I might like to relativize history, making it the appropriate form for widely different subject matters, it is important to follow this formulation through in order to arrive at an understanding of the anti-state function of chronicle.

131Ibid., 177.

132Ibid.

133Ibid., 176.

writers as writing's principal subject matter.¹³⁴

The testimonial genre delegitimized the state by chronicling the lives of exemplary individuals who were marginalized and persecuted by the state. Since modern states in Latin America claim to represent the best interests of their citizens, demonstrating this to be false is a blow to states' political legitimizing ideology. In order to achieve the greatest effect, the protagonists of *testimonios* must have lived their lives, or least have them portrayed, in such a way as to be seen worthy of historical recognition: "A meaningful life is one that aspires to the coherency of a story with a plot."¹³⁵ In this way the historical narratives that states used to justify their exercise of authority were undermined by testimonies that revealed meaningful lives, with beginning, middles, and ends, of citizens who had been occluded by that narrative.

Writing in a dirty realist style, today, goes one step further. Unlike with testimonial literature, the protagonists of these novels do not live lives conventionally deemed worthy of history or political representation. Neither these authors nor the people they evoke are seeking recognition by the state. Unlike Rigoberta Menchu, the main characters in these novels are not exemplary and may even be quite despicable. Their existence cannot be ordered into plots; they have "lost even the memory of a possible totality of life." If the state and nation have served as the subject matter for some writing, then the dirty realist genre is a type of literature where the horizon extends no further than the death of its protagonists.¹³⁶

What sense does it make to imbue people's lives with meaning through the prism of the state when the state does little for them and thus has little relevance? This irrelevance is structured into dirty realist literature by the abandonment meaningful beginnings or middles, making these narratives useless to history. "The only instance that does create order is the death of the protagonists."¹³⁷ It is a genre that is about and dedicated to people living on the edge. What does it matter if the state or the nation survives them? Rather, what is important are the seeming minutiae that could prove crucial to the extent that they hasten or postpone, for just a little longer, the protagonist's own certain demise.

Dirty realism, in its fidelity to the present, is much more true to the chronicle form than other genres. "There is a descriptive zeal in these novels that shows an attitude of respect toward reality. It seems to obey an urgency to simply 'count the corpses'..." They are less about "collective cause and more matter-of-fact." What may be disconcerting to the readers habituated to modernist literature is that writers in this realist mode refuse to "associate the crisis with a historical break nor do they insert it in a bigger historical scheme, but rather describe the present as so overwhelming that everything else loses importance." This privileging of the present, and the chronicler's zeal for description and a mere "first-order symbolization of temporality" may appear to skeptics as a refusal to engage in historical critique. And it is. But this is only because historical critique, in the hands of writers, is so inadequate when confronted with market ideology and the hegemony of visual media. A writer who creates words on a page is relatively impotent in a world inundated by television, radio and cinema. Nonetheless, these writers use the

¹³⁴For an overview of the chronicle form in Mexico, see Corona and Jorgensen, *The Contemporary Mexican Chronicle*.

¹³⁵White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative discourse and historical representation*, 173.

¹³⁶Birkenmaier, "Dirty Realism at the End of the Century: Latin American apocalyptic fictions," 493.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 494.

“realist mode to insist on the writer and the written word as an ethical instance from which to question and judge an otherwise uncontrollable flow of events.”¹³⁸

It may not be possible, within the foreseeable future, to do anything politically or economically to better conditions in Mexico, but that only makes the personal ethical dimension of life that much more pressing. Dirty realist novels are not only about the marginalized—teenage assassins, the homeless, transvestites—but also about the solitary writer, marginalized in a world saturated by other media. They slow time down, allow the present to fill the entire horizon, “so that the ‘I’ can find itself.” This is the ethical “I”, an “I” that reflects and chooses. But if these authors do this for themselves, they also do it for their readers. These “novels force everyone to take up responsibility vis-à-vis the transmission of experience itself. The problem is, in the case of these texts, not so much one of awareness, but of ordering and judging the information received through the mass media.”¹³⁹

Technicians of the Imaginary

The view that I take of writers in Mexico is a very broad one. This is justified in part because writers do not often specialize in one type of writing in Mexico as they do in other countries. In Mexico there is a long tradition of celebrating the writer as a public figure—the man of letters—who opines on all matters and publishes in many genres, from poetry to political analysis. Many of the writers who I worked with during my research were employed as journalists, or earned money by selling chronicles and essays on a wide range of subjects to magazines, while they wrote fiction or more literary works on the side. More importantly, however, I take a broad view of writers because it is multiple genres of writing that contribute to collective imaginings. I am interested in the writer as a technician of the imaginary, specifically as it relates to how individuals come to imagine their relationship to others.

Benedict Anderson, in describing the rise of nationalism, famously pointed to fiction and newspapers as two crucial forms of media. According to Anderson, they play a fundamental role in developing the sense of “homogeneous, empty time” so necessary for collective imagining. Anderson turns to José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi’s *The Mangy Parrot*, one of the first nationalist novels, published in 1816 in Mexico City. For Anderson, what demonstrates that there is a “national imagination” at work in the novel is “a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside.... Nothing assures us,” continues Anderson, “of this sociological solidity more than the succession of plurals.” A prison in the novel stands in for an entire series of prisons, “they conjure up a social space full of comparable prisons, none in itself of any unique importance, but all representative (in their simultaneous, separate existence)” of the kind of prisons that existed throughout the nation.¹⁴⁰

More important than the fusion between the fictional world and the world outside the novel is the simultaneity that readers come to imagine exists between themselves and others. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, readers of novels and newspapers were introduced to a perspective by which they could know events occurring to someone, while, “meanwhile”,

138Ibid., 490, 493, 495, 498.

139Ibid., 493, 507.

140Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflecting on the origin and spread of nationalism*, 30.

someone else is involved in a whole other set of events. The national collective is nothing other than an extrapolation of this perspective to the extent that one comes to imagine a whole population of people living a parallel existence, sharing certain values, a history, territory, language, and conventions. In the case of newspapers, what is essential is that each reader is aware that “his” ritual of reading the morning paper is being replicated by thousands “of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.”¹⁴¹

The problem for nationalists has always been how to foment a sentiment that can unite individuals and groups which under other circumstances may not have much reason to identify with each other. In Latin America, as in other developing areas of the world, there are significant barriers to overcome, not least of which are discrepancies in wealth, education and access to institutions and services. Doris Sommer in her study *Foundational Fictions*, for example, suggests that in Latin American romances, erotic union between individuals served as an allegory for a political union capable of bridging differences in class, race, political values, etc.¹⁴² Perhaps, though, it was not the romantic allegory as much as the empathetic suffering that these romances provoked in readers that made them attractive to officials who assigned them to students. The reading of literature, quite likely, was encouraged by nationalist officials in order to stimulate readers to feel for one another.¹⁴³

One way to understand developmentalism is as the latest major state effort to invest in the national imaginary through fiscal investments. However, state policies would have been of no effect if they had not been accompanied by extensive work on the imaginary by writers and other intellectuals. One can, as I will do repeatedly in this dissertation, turn to the literature on Mexican national character to appreciate the extent to which writers have gone to elaborate a national unifying ideology. The problem has been that they have had to confront again and again the gross inequalities that not only divide Mexicans, but put Mexico as a country at a disadvantage with respect to the United States and Europe.

Unifying Mexicans

Feeding off the ferment of the Mexican Revolution, the statesman and intellectual José Vasconcelos, in the mid-1920s, trumpeted the Latin American “race”—the Mexican *mestizos* in particular—as anointed by history to “convert into a new type all men.” He saw in miscegenation a demonstration of the openness of Latin Americans and their ability to absorb others. This inclusive spirit was worthy of the protagonists of a global future, he argued. The British and Anglo-American form of progress, by comparison, was doomed to failure because it was predicated on slavery, racism and exclusion.¹⁴⁴

Likewise, the most prolific Mexican chronicler of the twentieth century, Salvador Novo, also found reasons to write about Mexicans in a celebratory vein. He wrote of the “new greatness” of Mexico City, grand public works projects, and the sumptuous habits of elites. Subscribing to the official developmentalist rhetoric, he believed that it was just a matter of time before the

¹⁴¹Ibid., 35.

¹⁴²Sommer, *Foundational Fictions*.

¹⁴³Voageley, “Review: Foundational Fictions: The national romances of Latin America,” 393.

¹⁴⁴Vasconcelos, “La raza cósmica,” 64.

privileged lifestyles he described would be accessible to everyone.¹⁴⁵ Unlike Vasconcelos, he did not imagine a pivotal role for Mexicans in the world, but he did view modernity as being broad and inclusive enough to include them.

Other writers, however, have been less sanguine. In Chapter One, I refer to an essay by Ezequiel Chávez, written a decade before the Mexican Revolution. He argues, quite distinctly from Vasconcelos, that miscegenation and “unstable” genealogies are responsible for the “variable sensibility” of many Mexicans, their visceral passions, and the minimal degree to which they intellectualize their actions.¹⁴⁶ Likewise, in the mid-1930s, philosopher Samuel Ramos put forth the thesis that what characterized Mexicans was their profound sense of worthlessness. As with the slaves described by Friedrich Nietzsche, Mexicans channeled their weakness through resentment. The immigrant who comes to the city from the countryside, the *pelado*, was crucial for Ramos’ elaboration of a Mexican type, caught between backwardness and modernity, truly at home neither in the past nor the present.¹⁴⁷

Regardless of their distinct approaches, however, Vasconcelos and Novo shared with Chávez and Ramos a belief in a brighter future for Mexicans. If Vasconcelos and Novo celebrated the virtues of their compatriots and their participation in modern history, then Chávez and Ramos focused on the problems Mexicans as a group needed to confront in order to move forward. All four, in imagining the existence of a Mexican nation, in identifying themselves and their writings with that nation, and in assuming the responsibility for shepherding it along, are examples of nationalist intellectuals.

In 1950, the poet and Nobel laureate Octavio Paz contributed to the Mexican character literature with what has become its most durable statement. For him it was a sense of profound solitude that defined Mexicans. However, he argued, they were not alone. Mexican solitude was a species of existential experience common to all humans. What made it difficult for Mexicans to integrate into the world community, however, was their penchant for turning inward, for hiding behind masks. Violence, occurring during carnivalesque outbursts, was a demonstration for Paz of his compatriots’ attempt to forcefully insert themselves into the social order, expressions of their desire to belong to modern society. In order to break out from the solitary labyrinth, as Paz called it, it was necessary for Mexicans to exchange their hermetic solitude for an open one. “If we take off those masks, open ourselves,” concluded Paz, “if, finally, we confront each other, we will begin to truly think and live. There, in open solitude, transcendence awaits us: the hands of other solitary people.”¹⁴⁸

Twenty years later, Paz returned to his investigation and found that very little progress had been made. The authoritarian single-party regime, he argued, had failed to effect true and widespread development in Mexico. The “open solitude” that Paz prescribed for Mexicans was not possible as long as resources and benefits continued to be so unequally distributed. “Three conclusions follow from my analysis,” wrote Paz. First, “the crisis in Mexico is a consequence of a change in social structure” where new emerging classes only increase the division between Mexicans. Second, “only a democratic solution” would address the urgent problem of how to better

145Monsiváis, “Prólogo.”

146Chávez, “La sensibilidad del mexicano,” 31.

147Ramos, *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México*.

148Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*, 210.

integrate those who have not benefited from development. Lastly, “if the regime impedes the democratic solution, the result will not be the status quo but rather a situation of forced immobility that will end provoking an explosion and return back to a cycle of anarchy and dictatorship.”¹⁴⁹ Either the regime opens up, allowing democratization to take place, or squashes dissent and pushes Mexico back into political and social instability.

The stability of the mid-twentieth century was possible because of the relative independence that the official Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) enjoyed with respect to the business class. The PRI wielded a significant influence over the population. This was achieved, in part, by organizing service sector employees, workers and peasants into official unions and investing in education, television, cinema, and the arts. The overriding message was that of national unity, the party's legitimizing myth. The government's rhetoric, elaborated by intellectuals, created an expectation among the lower classes and the Left that the PRI would make good on its revolutionary discourse and use its relative autonomy and influence to oppose private interests that worked against the interests of the majority of Mexicans. This, however, did not occur.

As Paz points out, revolutionary rhetoric aside, the PRI had a relatively pragmatic approach to government. In order to oppose bankers and investors, the PRI would have had to mobilize the population and democratize its internal functioning. It was neither willing nor able to do either. The definitive break between intellectuals on the Left and the PRI came with the student massacre on October 2, 1968. The government decided that it would deal severely with critics, both among intellectuals and independent worker and peasant unions. “Alarming,” Paz writes, the PRI proved incapable of deflecting, let alone absorbing the intensifying “waves of inconformity and discontent.”¹⁵⁰ Eventually, its strategy of repression and censorship ended up alienating most intellectuals. I tell this story in more detail in Chapter VI. Paz himself would become estranged from the government in 1976, when he was forced out as editor of a cultural supplement that he founded. Intellectuals on the Right, who would publish in Paz's new periodical *Vuelta*, heatedly opposed intellectuals on the Left, publishing in *Nexos*. What is important to note here is that both groups similarly took increasing critical distance from the government and the official party.

The shift in the Mexican republic of letters that occurred from the student massacre in 1968 to the end of the 1980s can be appreciated by considering two anthropological tomes published in 1987. Roger Bartra, in *The Cage of Melancholy*, claimed that the entire tradition of national character studies arose from an error of misrecognition. In developing an ideology of national unity, bourgeois intellectuals in Mexico “had only the peasants and the proletariat as sources of inspiration.” In a critical stroke, Bartra, who had headed the Mexican Communist Party, turned to Friedrich Engels' study of the working class in nineteenth century England to demonstrate the fallacy of Mexican exceptionalism. Engels shows, writes Bartra, “that the typical proletarian tendencies to impulsiveness, improvidence and, of course, to the abuse of alcohol and sex are a necessary counterweight to ease the privations, instability, and degradation characteristic of their everyday lives.” As manufacturing and the proletariat lost their importance in those countries that were the first to be industrialized, the tendencies that Engels originally recognized in the behavior of the English working class were increasingly found in countries like Mexico, where

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 284.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 268-9.

“the pains of a deferred industrial revolution are made more acute by the consequences of colonial and imperial oppression.”¹⁵¹ In this way, Bartra inserts Mexico, even more than Paz had, into the history of the West and global capitalist development.

The second anthropological tome published in 1987 could not have been more different in tone and content. Where Bartra saw Native Americans holding on to forms imposed upon them by Spanish colonialists, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla saw a millennial civilization resisting 500 years of European domination. In his book, *Mexico Profound*, Bonfil Batalla demonstrates how Mexican institutions, customs, behavior and language testify to the negated and repressed Native American impulse.¹⁵² The Tojolabales, Tzetzales and Choles who violently appeared on the national stage as part of the uprising of the EZLN, although Bonfil Batalla would not live to see it, appeared to confirm his thesis. After its declaration of war on the Mexican government on first of January 1994, the EZLN quickly abandoned its Maoist rhetoric, adopting one which referred to centuries of Native American suffering and their struggles against oppression. In the end, however, even though the EZLN gave an important boost to the Native American movement in Mexico, its actions fed into debates about democratic reform and civil rights more than it did a general consciousness of the Native American roots of Mexican national culture.

Surprisingly enough, Bonfil Batalla concludes his book on the survival of a negated pre-Columbian civilization in Mexico by arguing for further democratization.¹⁵³ He could do this because he already argued that open and plural democracy was not a Western institution in Mexico but a millennial custom practiced in Native American communities. It would have been difficult to appreciate this at the time, but in their ultimate objectives the two anthropologists were actually in agreement. Both saw in the single-party state the root of Mexico’s problems. It mattered little that Bartra interpreted the government’s authoritarianism as representative of a backwardness among more openly democratic Western states, whereas Bonfil Batalla viewed the state’s authoritarianism as a Western form of democracy imposed upon a more egalitarian indigenous form. The truth was that they were both calling for the dismantling of the clientelist apparatus, for decentralization, greater transparency, and respect for plurality.

The books by Bartra and Bonfil Batalla can now be seen as the first statements of the new convergence among intellectuals around the political paradigm—plural democracy. They were also themselves symptoms of new ruptures. Only ten years before, these two anthropologists had been part of a debate in which both sides presupposed a future Mexico that was not only more prosperous, but also more integrated.¹⁵⁴ By the end of the 1980s, though, Bartra would dismiss the indigenous movement as anachronistic, the product of Native Americans holding onto cultural forms imposed on them by colonial and state governments. Bonfil Batalla, for his part, sharply criticized non-Native Mexicans for their racism and “imaginary” civilization. In retrospect, what is amazing is how quickly revolutionary goals were exchanged with reformist ones, how quickly intellectuals abandoned solidarity with the nation as a whole, and became spokespersons for specific groups. Democracy appeared in these two books as it does today, the only political-economic idea with the potential of bringing together Europhiles and *indigenistas*,

151Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and metamorphosis in the Mexican character*, 124.

152Bonfil Batalla, *México profundo*.

153Ibid., 234-7.

154Hewitt de Alcántara, *Anthropological perspectives on rural Mexico*, 156ff.

the wealthy and poor, urban and rural residents, all the various divisions, classes and sectors of the population inhabiting the Mexican territory.

The Democracy Consensus

It would be nearly impossible to exaggerate the extent to which democratization, among intellectuals, has become an uncontested political good. In his study of two pivotal journals, Maarten van Delden outlines the history of how the antagonism between right-of-center writers, publishing in *Vuelta*, and left-of-center writers, publishing in *Nexos*, was finally resolved. From the 1950s, Paz was increasingly critical of the Soviet regime and totalitarianism in general. Later, he would also criticize the Cuban Revolution. In voicing his criticisms, he brought upon himself the ire of the Mexican Left, either because many fully supported the USSR and Cuba, or because they felt that it would better serve the progressive agenda if Paz would direct his aspersion toward the capitalist West and American imperialism. *Nexos* was created by left-leaning intellectuals as a counterpoint to Paz's *Vuelta*. The first polemical exchange came in the late 1970s and was one between Paz and Monsiváis. Later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, each magazine hosted a conference to which they invited intellectuals to debate its significance. *Vuelta*'s conference stressed the demise of communism while *Nexos*' the need to rethink how to move the progressive agenda forward.¹⁵⁵

Central to the differences between *Vuelta* and *Nexos* was a distinct view on the role of intellectuals. Smarting from attacks from both the government and the Left, Paz, unsurprisingly, advocated for the critical independence of intellectuals and their obligation to free themselves from dogma, party and ideological commitments. In contradistinction, the writers of *Nexos* believed that the function of intellectuals was to serve society, "contribute to solving the problems of the country, principally the problem of inequality." Mexican intellectuals, even though they come from the social elite, according to *Nexos*, needed to link their work with the "preoccupations of the masses... and the multiple factors that halt, complicate or deform our development."¹⁵⁶

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the retreat of the socialist project around the world had dramatic repercussions in Mexico for intellectuals. The horizon of political possibility contracted. It became more difficult to imagine, especially for left-leaning critics, how to transform Mexico into a more developed and egalitarian country. By the end of the 1980s, however, those who advocated revolutionary change in Mexico were without ideological support. As I mentioned above, Paz had already identified democracy as the only path forward for Mexico in 1970. It took two decades for leftists to accept that he had been right. In 1994, Monsiváis expressed the new consensus by publishing in both *Nexos* and Paz's *Vuelta* the opinion that the only way to address inequality in Mexico was through democratic reform.

Market Individuation

The point of this project is to contextualize the emergence of two modes of writing. In Mexico City, writing about contemporary conditions is either sordid and apocalyptic, or it projects an

¹⁵⁵Van Delden, "Conjunciones y Disyunciones: La rivalidad entre *Vuelta* y *Nexos*."

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 108.

optimism associated with the bounties of free markets. One vein is pessimistic about the future of the country and its population's well-being, while the other sidesteps such pessimism by focusing on the self-realization possible through personal consumption. These are two responses to a prevailing situation. They are not as opposed as they may first appear: Both modes emphasize personal choice as the best action given specific limiting circumstances.

Of course, democracy denotes many things. The current consensus around democratization is possible in part because its meaning is abstract and imprecise, giving room to multiple and contradictory definitions and understandings. What is pertinent here is to understand democracy within a tradition of individualism. Today, in many parts of the world, there is a strong correlation between the act of voting, choosing from selection of candidates, and the act of choosing from a selection of commodities and services in so-called free markets.

What I have attempted to describe in this introduction is the breaking down of the clientelist state in Mexico and its legitimizing ideologies. The state was organized into a series of corporations, that is unions and other organs representing various sectors of the population brought together under one party that claimed to speak for the population as a whole. The most successful state-sponsored program during the twentieth century was developmentalism, the underlying rationale of the Mexican Miracle, which was followed by the less-convincing and shorter lived supply-side ideology of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Most recently, democracy has become the frame by which both the government legitimizes its authority and by which that authority is contested. Whatever else democratization is, however, it is a process by which populations have been individuated, pluralized, and gained independence from the state.

“Elections”, whether involving commodities, candidates, or services, form a direct link between individuals and governments and corporations, bypassing intermediary entities. Under extreme duress, however, electoral democracies and competitive markets may not prove sufficient to stave off widespread malcontent, insubordination, and violence. After the failures of developmentalism and supply-side economics, and given the worsening levels of violence and economic hardship today, the problem for the Mexican government, as with others around the world, is discovering new legitimizing ideologies and paradigms. As George Steiner has pointed out, trade agreements, central banks, agriculture subsidies, investments in technology, tax rates, currencies, free markets and bureaucracies do not of themselves inspire the “human spirit.”¹⁵⁷ This is where intellectuals must play a role as technicians of the imaginary.

The unprecedented anti-corruption and drug trafficking campaign being enacted since 2006 by the current administration is but one demonstration of an attempt to legitimize the exercise of authority through moral arguments. As I suggest above, this move implicitly recognizes that the Mexican government has limited control over the economy as well as the distribution of benefits. The left-of-center mayor of Mexico City has launched a series of programs meant to suppress the informal economy and encourage citizens to take more personal responsibility for the welfare of their community. These programs have notoriously been accompanied by generous doses of bread and circus, including an ice-skating rink in the middle of Constitutional Square and free prescriptions of the impotence drug Viagra for men over the age of sixty-five.¹⁵⁸ No candidate from the country's half dozen political parties has in recent years ventured to put forth any social

¹⁵⁷Steiner, “Una idea de Europa.”

¹⁵⁸Lacey, “Mayor Aims to Add Spark to Flagging Sex Lives.”

and economic measure that could credibly address the problems threatening to further fracture the country. The situation in Mexico, some assert, is on the verge of spiraling completely out of control even to the point of drawing in the United States and other neighboring countries.¹⁵⁹

One way to understand why writers are preoccupied with a “country in ruins” and why literature in Mexico often carries a dark tone is to see it as a surrender both to the inevitability of markets and a depressing economic situation.¹⁶⁰ This, however, is only part of the story. In writing about life in a world turned upside down, writers also subvert the historical narrative that has for so long legitimized the authoritarian state, one that has been unwilling and incapable of better redistributing benefits and providing for the health and wellbeing of its citizens. In writing about drug dealers and other sordid characters, they write against the growing moralism. In invoking with their writing the so-called national character traits of Mexicans—worthlessness, resentment, and solitude—they seek to escape diagnosis. At the same time, they speculate on how these traits are continually reproduced on an individual level in a country rent by inequality and violence. And in chronicling a sordid present, writers in the dirty realist style demonstrate their courage and commitment to understanding the present moment and reality without the ideological filters of earlier generations.

A gritty realist mode of writing not only works against the market-friendly content of more mainstream media, but it puts forward writing and reading as two essential practices by which to filter and reflect on the experiences transmitted by those media. In insisting on chronicling the twists and turns of a squalid reality, writers in Mexico City take the impossibilities of a contemporary situation seriously, much more seriously than those who continue to traffic in the old ideologies that would infuse the misery of the present with meaning and a promise for a better future. Most importantly, the writers who are the subjects of this dissertation demonstrate that whether one is a writer, reader or merely a citizen, the individual will always face ethical dilemmas in the choices he or she makes.

159Bogan et al., “The Next Disaster.”

160 “Ideas for a country in ruins” is the subtitle of a periodical, *Replicante*, edited by Rogelio Villarreal.

Vignette: Recruiting Writers

With this vignette, I intend to give the reader a glimpse of the kind of meeting that frequently took place among the writers I did research. The principle character is Rogelio, who invited several writers who he wanted to sell on writing for the magazine he edits. This takes place at the beginning of my research. As the editor of another magazine told me, he invites writers to have drinks, waiting until late in the evening before proposing to them an item of business. He then follows up by calling them the next morning to remind them of what they have agreed to write and at what price.

About a week ago, Rogelio and I started exchanging short emails blaming each other for having abandoned our friendship. Yesterday we talked on the phone and he told me that I should join him and a someone else for lunch. I arrived at Rogelio's apartment a few minutes late, but it took him another few to come down. Marisol Rodríguez accompanied him. She is a student of design, and as both she and Rogelio told me is contributing to the next number of *Replicante* with an article on an art magazine.¹⁶¹ Rogelio asked me about my research as we three walked together to the Yucatecan cantina Xel Ha. I told him about contacts that I had made and how my research was progressing. He repeated that he was waiting for my article on the George Steiner piece that appeared in the newspaper *El Universal*.¹⁶² The next number is closing in a week.

After greeting the host, Rogelio told him that he was expecting more people to show up. The host said he could have his usual table. He sat with his back against the wall. Marisol sat to his left and I to his right. Just as we ordered a round of beers, Julieta Arévalo joined us. After standing and greeting her, I let her sit next to Rogelio and moved one place over. She also ordered a beer. I asked Rogelio and Julieta how they met. They had met many years ago through Guillermo Fadanelli. Rogelio commented that Julieta and I looked alike. I laughed and said that she had reminded me of one of my sisters when I saw her. Julieta said that I looked like her live-in boyfriend.

Obviously, Rogelio's intent was to sell the two of them on his magazine. Marisol was already contributing but since she studied design, and as she told me later, thought that the design of the magazine was terrible, Rogelio was trying to get her to come up with some proposal for changes. Julieta, on the other hand, had not yet contributed anything. Rogelio had brought her copies of the latest two issues. He kept pushing her to submit something short, even if it was something that she had already written. Apparently, he had some texts by her that he liked, but they were too long. She kept on repeating that she would like to contribute, but that she was a little timid. She was getting practice freelancing for other magazines, but still she did not feel that her writing was up to the level that she would like it to be.

Until recently, Julieta had been working as a copywriter, a job that as she said paid very well. However, she wanted to do something else, "to do something" with her life. She was contributing to the federal government's consumer protection agency's magazine *Revista del Consumidor*, and had taken a job with a publisher reviewing manuscripts. She later told me that

¹⁶¹This article was published as Rodríguez, "Los sinsentidos del arte."

¹⁶²This article appeared as Sánchez Allred, "El sueño eurocentrista de Steiner."

she had reviewed the manuscript of a book that I recently purchased and read.¹⁶³ Of course, I was very excited about this fact and that she was working with *Revista del Consumidor*, but she obviously did not share my enthusiasm. She saw these jobs as a step to something better. Working for the publisher and consumer magazine was helping her improve her writing while she earned some money. Rogelio concluded as he looked at me, “there is no shame in writing to get paid.”

The cantina was noisy and from my position at the table I could not always hear what was being directed mostly toward Rogelio. Many of the references I did not catch or only understood later on. For example, I did not realize that they were talking about the magazine *Complot* until the topic had almost been exhausted. Marisol had said that the magazine was trash, Rogelio that it used to be good until about five years ago. Julieta, alluding to a change of staff, commented that a director really does make a difference for a magazine.

About the time that they started bringing out the *botanas*, the food that is included with the price of the drinks, Brenda Lozano joined us. She contributes every other month to the literary magazine *Letras Libres*. Rogelio repeated his routine and gave her a couple issues of *Replicante* as he told her that he wanted her to write something for his magazine.

Marisol had brought in a Boing! juice with her. Rogelio had made a joke about it. Marisol did not drink more than one beer. Every time another round was ordered, Rogelio would ask her if she was sure that she did not want more. Occasionally he would set his glass in front of her. She would politely refuse. Julieta, on the other hand, would accept the same offers with very little resistance. Lozano ordered her drinks separately. When Rogelio and Julieta switched to anisette, she abandoned her beer too and ordered one for herself. Since Marisol had finished her juice, we all urged her to go to a nearby corner store to buy herself another one. She eventually did, but came back empty handed. The store did not have a flavor she liked.

Throughout, Rogelio continued to encourage especially Julieta and Lozano to write something for the magazine. Once he said that Marisol and I were already contributing. Julieta seemed to be convinced that even though she needed to work on her writing, writing was what she really wanted to do. I looked at Marisol, a design student that according to Rogelio wrote very well. What exactly does it mean to write well for Rogelio? Then I looked at Lozano, a writer that contributes to the most prestigious literary magazine in Mexico. What makes a good writer? Apparently, Lozano had been to Italy some time back and had sent Rogelio some chronicles that he had liked very much.

Lozano told us about an article that she wrote for the October edition of *Letras Libres* on Albert Einstein.¹⁶⁴ She wanted to rectify the heroic image that people have of the physicist, show him as the human that he was, defects and all. She told us that once Einstein, when he was already old and famous, was approached by a young woman who did not know who he was. She asked him what he did. He told her that he studied physics. She said that she studied physics too, and that if he needed any help she could give it to him. He enthusiastically accepted. Lozano was of the idea that Einstein, the man, should not be reduced to his Theory of Relativity. She excitedly told

¹⁶³It is one that I treat extensively below but since the review process is meant to be anonymous I will not reveal which one.

¹⁶⁴You can find a copy of it online at <http://www.letraslibres.com/index.php?art=10768>.

us how she was after the “everyday humanity” of Einstein. I could not help thinking that as an anthropologist I too was after everyday humanity, the everyday humanity of writers like her.

Chapter IV: Mexico City in Print

For over half a millennium, the site of Mexico City has been a capital and the largest marketplace, first for what is now known as the Aztec empire, then for the Spanish colony of New Spain, and finally, for the independent country of Mexico. In this chapter I present print as a peculiarly privileged commodity for the city. The spectrum of print is comprised of profit-driven city lifestyle magazines, on one extreme, and small, collectively run and more highly acclaimed literary publications, on the other. Each of these extremes is distinguished not only from but, more importantly for this research, by mission. As already argued, the dirty realist style of many contemporary texts distance themselves from the national optimism that used to be imagined by nationalist writers. Moreover, as I will argue in this chapter, the more profit motivated urban lifestyle magazines respond to the demands of a highly differentiated market. These publications offer advertisers access to a niche urban audience. By promoting the consumer interests of niche groups they move away from “the nation” and thereby contribute to further fragmenting the wider population's sense of belonging to a larger entity.

A City in Print

Confronted with chaos, by the seemingly infinite and random details of people and things worked over by centuries of entropy, it is not surprising that one would turn to the neat lines of printed words in an attempt to give the mind images by which to comprehend it all. Books and periodicals have played precisely this role for millions of those who have lived in Mexico City. Magazines, particularly since a recent upswing in the business of importing, translating, and producing them, serve a privileged function among forms of print for the inhabitants of the Mexican metropolis by providing portraits of others and prescriptions by which to live life.

Since 2003 two urban magazines, *Chilango* and *dF por Travesías*, have emerged to cater to readers who not only desire to know what there is to know about the city—social spots, places to eat, cultural events, and entertainment—but to discover more about the different divisions of the human species, with its subclasses and characters, that live in the largest and densest demographic concentration in the western hemisphere.¹⁶⁵ In the words of one of its founders and editors, *Chilango* magazine's mission is to provide a “code” for the residents of Mexico City. Felipe Soto projects that the content and tone of his periodical, although it reaches only a fraction of the population, will replicate like DNA throughout the metropolitan area, infusing it with order and giving its residents a positive self-image.

Looking back, it is understandable that I should have found myself spending hours shoulder to shoulder with others browsing through magazines as I began my year-and-a-half long stay in Mexico City beginning in January 2005. The organized rows of colorful covers bearing bold and catchy print, arranged by genre, is not unlike the image that comes to mind when I think about Mexico City itself, with its wide illuminated avenues, buildings, signs, billboards, and specialized zones. It is in walking the streets, being jostled by hundreds of anonymous bodies,

¹⁶⁵ *Chilango*, published from fall 2003 to the present, is produced by Grupo Editorial Expansión, founded in 1966 and purchased by TimeWarner in August 2005. *dF por Travesías*, published from fall 2003 to winter 2006, was produced by Editorial Mapas, founded in 2003, a company that today produces two titles, *Travesías* and *Gatopardo*, as well as custom edits, publishes, and distributes periodicals for various clients.

crammed into poorly ventilated subway cars, viewing hours of urban scenery pass by through a taxi or bus window, it is in struggling to process hundreds of faces, expressions, sounds, sights, smells, and tastes, and in knowing that there are thousands, even millions more, that one risks losing the ability to perceive anything at all.

To know Mexico City as a city one needs only to walk to any major intersection, plaza, or subway station. There you will find stands filled with books, newspapers, and magazines. At dawn, thousands of kiosks, white metal structures, are unlocked, opened up, and covered in glossy print, books or periodicals. The reading material is arranged on flat surfaces and hung on the kiosk doors and frames in tight parallel rows, held in place by gravity, friction, string, and clothespins. A person walking the principle avenues of the city would quite literally step on books and run into magazines if she did not duck or otherwise make his way around them.

It is as if Mexico City begs pedestrians to consume it in print. At its very heart, running next to the foundations of the National Palace and under the Constitutional Square, there is a passageway known as A Walk Among Books. It is one kilometer in length and runs north and south between the metro stops Zócalo and Pino Suárez. There one can find retail outlets for forty-two of the most important publishers in Mexico. Each outlet contains not only newly published books, but volumes from the publisher inventories going back, in some cases, several decades. The books are displayed so that the thousands of commuters that make their way through the passageway everyday can easily see them. The website for A Walk Among Books claims that it is the largest bookstore in the world, and the most important in Mexico.¹⁶⁶ Halfway through the underground walkway there is a small library and an amphitheater that commuters are invited to use as a reading area. There they can also attend regularly scheduled lectures; the one that was being hosted the last time that I made my way through the passageway in January 2008 was on Plato's *Republic*.

Stepping out of the passageway onto street level at the north end one can find a series of kiosks. Located just east of the Metropolitan Cathedral, between it and the excavated remains of the Aztec temple complex over which it was built, the kiosks sell everything from encyclopedias and dictionaries, to technical manuals on law and accounting, to newspapers and gossip magazines, to pornographic comic books. Near the entrance of the Metropolitan Cathedral, there are often reproductions of historic photographs for sale. One popular photograph shows Zapatista soldiers who famously went for coffee just five blocks west on Avenue Francisco I. Madero, at the Sanborns in the House of Tiles, after taking the Capital in 1914. Today, almost a century later, Sanborns continues to serve coffee and also has a well-stocked bookstore. Maps can be found at another stand just one block further west, just to one side of the entrance to a franchise of the national chain bookstore Gandhi, located directly facing the Palace of Fine Arts.

Walking back to the Constitutional Square along Donceles, the street of used-book sellers, with any luck one can locate a copy of a small volume edited by Salvador Novo (b. 1904-d. 1974), *Seis siglos de la ciudad de México* ("Six Centuries of Mexico City"). In it there are eight selections beginning with an excerpt from the mid-sixteenth century writings of Fernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, grandson of the Aztec ruler Moctezuma II, in which he recounts the founding of the City in 1325. An even better find would be Novo's own *Neuva grandeza*

¹⁶⁶ <http://www.unpaseoporloslibros.com/>

mexicana (New Mexican Greatness). Novo was the most prolific chronicler of twentieth-century Mexico City. In this book, he tells of a week-long tour of the metropolis given to a friend visiting from Monterrey. It is clear from reading the book that walking the city is not enough to know it. Novo writes of the books that he will give his friend to take back with him to Monterrey, books that will assist him to better appreciate and understand what he has seen, learned, and experienced.

Privileging Print

Although it is continually lamented that residents of Mexico City read less than those of other cities in North America and Europe, print has an unparalleled visibility in the Mexican capital. Regardless of how much the residents of Mexico City actually read, and they apparently read more than some statistics might suggest, print holds for them an esteemed position among media.¹⁶⁷ Angel Rama explained the surprising importance (surprising given low rates of reading) that writing has for Latin Americans by appealing to the sacredness of the Christian scriptures and the weight of Catholic bulls and metropolitan directives during the colonial period. A small cadre of lettered men have worked for centuries to instill in the minds of the largely illiterate population a sense of reverence for the written word. However, the place that writing assumed and the power wielded by the small group of writers exceeded even that which was necessary for the proper functioning of ecclesiastical and civil bureaucracies. As Rama put it: “From the time of its consolidation in the final third of the sixteenth century, the activities of the lettered city took on huge proportions, apparently unrelated to the tiny number of literate persons who could read its voluminous writings—unrelated, even, to its specific administrative or judicial functions—and the high social rank of its ‘lettered’ functionaries...”¹⁶⁸

It was not the spoken word, but rather written text that was primordial, eternal, binding, that formed the best medium for expressing all that could inspire and was most dear to the Latin American spirit. A poetry contest in Mexico City at the end of the sixteenth century, only decades after the conquest, attracted more than three hundred poets. So did another a century later, a surprising number if one considers that after the Conquest, forced evacuation, and smallpox epidemics, the population of the city did not exceed 60,000 people, few of whom could read.¹⁶⁹ With the spread of literacy through public and private education during the twentieth century, this aura around writing became not so much dissipated as diffused. The great reverence for the written word fostered among a largely illiterate population during the colonial period has been replaced, among a literate but non-reading public by a more general respect.

There is a man who sells a book on orthography to drivers waiting at stoplights on Insurgentes, Patriotismo, Revolución, and other principle avenues. He apparently wrote and published the book himself. Over his head, he carries a sign that reads, “Stop committing orthographic errors.” In the prologue to his book, he writes, “Orthography is the touchstone that puts in evidence the level of culture that a human has. Those who forget or neglect to adhere to proper orthography

¹⁶⁷ Residents of Mexico City report reading 4.6 books per year according to an official report, CONACULTA, “Encuesta Nacional de Lectura.” For an a critical review of the data from this report, see Zaid, “La lectura como fracaso del sistema educativo.”

¹⁶⁸ Rama, *The lettered city*, 18.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

when they write cannot prosper in what they do nor aspire to be considered cultured persons.”¹⁷⁰

It is not difficult to imagine that this “author”, as he makes his way between cars driven by people who commit errors of orthography, feels some of the smugness that lettered men have always felt, a sense of superiority. In the words of a protagonist of a recent Mexico City novel, he may feel protected from others by pounds and pounds of printed-paper.¹⁷¹ Perhaps he also feels an obligation to others, a responsibility that comes from having a more intimate contact with the perennial realm of letters than do most mortals. He would not be alone in privileging the written word in this way. In conversing with taxicab drivers and others individuals I have come across in the streets and public areas of the city, it has been my experience that they will frequently invoke the printed word to infer authority. Sometimes it will be the sport’s page or crime section of that day’s newspaper, or literature documenting a conspiracy, the Bible, or a book in the ever-popular genre of esotericism. Many of my casual interlocutors have given the basis of their claims in the form: “I read and observe,” in that order. The fictional protagonist cited above said of himself: “I have read, traveled and learned.”¹⁷² When asked in a recent nationwide survey to identify what reading is good for, what function it had, the most popular answer was “For learning.” The next most popular reply was: “To be cultured.” “Culture”, used in this context, is that which distinguishes humans from animals, and more fully realized humans from others who are “vulgar”.¹⁷³

The highest compliment paid to literature in Mexico City is that it continues to be pirated, printed illegally and sold and resold in the streets, subway, squares, and by some used booksellers. According to the National Chamber for the Mexican Publishing Industry, one of every five books is published illegally; that is, in violation of copyright laws and without the paying of taxes or royalties. You can find brand-new volumes in the public market La Ciudadela offered for a fraction of the price charged in bookstores. A pirated copy of Carlos Fuentes’ *La silla del águila* appeared on the streets three days before it was officially released, while another author’s book appeared on the streets an entire fifteen days before, selling for only five dollars instead of the retail price of fifteen. There is a story about a woman called The Pirate who made such a fortune illegally reprinting textbooks for medical students that she retired and bought herself three houses.¹⁷⁴ In the continuing demand for print in all forms and at all prices, in the regard that people continue to have for published text and its authority, and in the thousands of outdoor book fairs, stores, billboards, pamphlets, notices, graffiti, and kiosks, the Mexican capital is a city in which print is privileged. It has an important role in the everyday practices and lives of its residents.

Chronicling Urban Optimism

Roxanne Dávila suggests that in Novo’s *Nueva grandeza mexicana*, in which he chronicles a walking tour that he gives a friend visiting from out of town, one can perceive Mexico City as a

170Hernández, “El Caballero del Verbo Urbano (Section: Enormes Minucias),” 28; Lida, *First stop in the New World*, 55.

171Servín, *Al final del vacío*, 260.

172Ibid., 34.

173CONACULTA, “Encuesta Nacional de Lectura,” 83.

174Tercero, “¿Qué se lee en México?.”

palimpsest, a surface written upon and rewritten over repeatedly. Novo restructures and organizes Mexico City not only through his walking and writing. He also draws from hundreds of other texts: “These texts expand and complement the image and understanding of the cityscape that the narrator and his friend experience as they walk. It is in this way that the textual references throughout *Nueva grandeza mexicana* not only provide the opportunity to better grasp the complexity of the cityscape but also highlight the importance of literature for constructing the city for the narrator’s friend, the reader, and for the general reading public.”¹⁷⁵

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how Mexico City continues to be understood and created through writing. By beginning and concluding with the emergence of the urban lifestyle magazines *Chilango* and *dF por Travesías*, I spotlight one way in which Mexico City is being branded during a period of democratization. To present a positive image of Mexico City, offering residents representations of the city that they can be proud of, *Chilango* and *dF por Travesías* have avoided reporting on crime, street children, poverty, pollution, water scarcity, corruption, and traffic, as well as most other social and political problems. The very name of *Chilango* magazine is a popular derogatory moniker used by people across Mexico to refer to the residents of the capital. In appropriating *Chilango*, in assuming the epithet with pride, the editors and contributors of the magazine participate in a symbolic positional struggle to give Mexico City a coherent positive image among cosmopolitan centers. The self-proclaimed confidence and uninhibited tone with which the articles in these magazines are written is seen as an antidote to the melancholy, nostalgia, and resentment of other, either more popular or more literary, city writings.

Many years ago the writer Novo celebrated the greatness, the incomparable virtues, of Mexico City. In his prologue to *Nueva grandeza mexicana*, Carlos Monsiváis (b.1938) calls Novo “The last of the urban optimists.... Novo, in his chronicles and attitude, personalizes the belief in the good luck of the City and its elite.”¹⁷⁶ For Monsiváis, Novo’s optimism is no longer possible. What is more, the current atmosphere of hopelessness has all but erased the memory that only thirty years ago what was “customary was dreamy delirium, an enthusiastic wagering on the boundless future of the City,” the Mexican capital serving as a symbol of the possibility for progress throughout Latin America. Novo adopted his rosy perspective in the 1920s, when Mexico City was emerging from the Revolution with “confidence and a vocation for modernity.” Novo’s task, the one he claimed for himself during the length of his long career, was to be the official chronicler of the Metropolis, was “to praise what modernity had imposed and to exalt what the fury of capitalism had not extinguished.”¹⁷⁷

But Monsiváis was wrong to say that Novo was the last of the optimists writing about Mexico City. Four years after Monsiváis wrote his prologue, the above-mentioned urban magazines emerged, both of which have adopted a positive tone toward the city. In addition, like Novo, the sanguine contributors to these periodicals “praise the prosperity of the few.” The difference is that while Novo embraced developmentalism, the contributors to these magazines represent late free-market nihilism. Novo believed that development policies would one day make Mexico City as technologically modern, cultured, and wealthy as Paris or New York. He could abandon

¹⁷⁵Dávila, “Mexico City as urban palimpsest in Salvador Novo’s *Nueva grandeza mexicana*,” 110.

¹⁷⁶Monsiváis, “Prólogo,” 9.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 9-10.

himself to, and celebrate the “leisure and ‘decent’ lustfulness of those whose only concern is with their membership in the *Establishment*, their professional careers, their gardens, their trips, Sunday afternoon games of bridge,” because one day soon it would be a lifestyle available to all.”¹⁷⁸ Although versions of trickle-down-economics continue to circulate, especially as a strictly fiscal and drastically less egalitarian version of developmentalism, neither the editors of *Chilango* or *dF por Travesías*, nor any of their contributors entertain any hope that the elite forms of existence they portray are in any way attainable for the vast majority of the least privileged of their readers.

There is a sinister and ugly underbelly to the glossy pages that celebrate the lifestyles of wealthier segments of the population. The editors have adopted an upbeat ideology, avoided including anything unpleasant in these publications, because experience has proven that lifestyle magazines belong to a niche market in which crime, overpopulation, and pollution do not sell. Markets diversify. Roughly, Wal-Mart stores in the most privileged neighborhoods sell as many *Chilango* magazines as those in the least privileged.¹⁷⁹ For consumers of these magazines, whether they are rich or poor, a celebratory take on their city is what they are looking for. For the rest, or for other occasions, there are literary works, venues dedicated to investigative journalism, and a slew of more popular publications that one can use to read about the depravity and misery of Mexico City.

Mexico City as Literary Setting

Remarkably, not many recent novels are set in the Mexican capital. “Given how much raw material there is on the streets of Mexico City, and how many novelists make it their home, it is surprising how few of them use the place as content, backdrop, or subtext to their narratives,” writes David Lida in his recent book-length chronicle of the city. Many of these writers, “such as Jorge Volpi, Mario Bellatín, and Javier García Galeano, set their books in real or imagined versions of Asian or European countries, while numerous others—Mónica Lavín, Mauricio Montiel, and Ana García Bergua, among them—write stories and novels that take place in cities which, whether or not they are named, remain generic and for the most part undescribed.”¹⁸⁰

That writers in Mexico City choose to set their works in far-away or generic places is an expression of postnationalism. David cites Cristina Rivera Garza as writing, “The production of a non-place from a non-place is complete exile...”¹⁸¹ Postnationalism is nothing if not the sense that one is exiled from one’s own country, a country that no longer exists. An extreme of this literature can be seen in *El camino de Santiago* by Patricia Laurent Kullick, an author from Monterrey. The indeterminacy of place is reflected back onto the protagonist as a fragmenting of her own psyche. The narrative is about how her multiple selves struggle with each other and other people outside her body. It could be easily interpreted as an allegory of a nation that no longer provides individuals with a distinct sense of self.

Besides reflecting a postnational condition, there are other reasons why writers do not set their works in Mexico City. One is literary distinction. To differentiate themselves from previous

178Ibid., 13-4. “Establishment” appears in English in the original.

179 Personal communication with Felipe Soto, 26 August 2005.

180Ibid. “Establishment” appears in English in the original.

181Lida, *First stop in the New World*, 262.

generations, many writers have abandoned, and expressly write against the various sorts of realism and rootedness of previous generations. Another is demographics. Mexico City has gone from a population of a half a million in 1900 to nearly nine million, twenty million for the entire metropolitan area. Novo advocated walking the streets of the city in order to write about it. Nevertheless, the city that he wrote about was knowable in a way that Mexico City today is not. "It is worth mentioning," continues David, "that most of the city's authors are from privileged backgrounds and few have explored the city, outside of the predictable academic-literary circles, with much dedication."¹⁸²

David is one writer who assiduously researches and writes about the Mexican capital. There are others like him. He mentions, for example, Guillermo Fadanelli and J.M. Servín. "Fadanelli's highly readable novels are set in an instantly recognizable Mexico City, mostly in neighborhoods of dingy housing projects, cheap hotel rooms, and Chinese-Mexican cafeterias whose patrons linger forever over a single cup of coffee. His books are populated by pedantic professors and petty bureaucrats, unloved prostitutes, submissive garbagemen, and drug-addled girls from well-to-do families who get their kicks from going to bed with strangers for money." Similarly, Servín "also takes a gritty view-from-the-sidewalk approach to his fiction."¹⁸³ He published a novel featuring dog fighting in Mexico City two years before the acclaimed film *Amores Perros* was released. In December of 2007, David recommended that I look at Servín's latest novel, set in an apocalyptic Mexico City.

Pessimistic Writing

I evoke a large quantity of pessimistic urban writing by citing the most recent novel of the critically acclaimed author Juan Manuel Servín, *Al final del vacío* ("At the End of the Void"). By setting his novel in post-apocalyptic Mexico City, Servín creates a literary laboratory for diagnosing the city and its inhabitants. Servín does not tell his readers what the apocalypse was, but knowing that something happened to interrupt the normal functioning of social life in the city, allows us to suspend certain expectations. It also gives Servín greater freedom for drawing out the character traits he attributes to his protagonists. Furthermore, Servín's book, which can be considered an experiment in combining fiction with sensational journalism, is useful for me here because it can be taken as an extended reflection on the relationship between city and print.

The plot consists of a man who wanders through the metropolis looking for his girlfriend who has disappeared. He has not seen her since the disaster that brought the city to a halt. Servín wrote the novel in the first person, using the voice of the central character to narrate the story. From the day he started first grade, Servín's protagonist tells us, he would browse through the evening paper that his father brought home, entertaining himself with the comics and a section with photographs of semi-nude women. He would also spend hours trying to decipher the stories in the crime section. The *nota roja*, literally "red feature" in Spanish, as I will argue later on, has played a significant role in fostering an image of Mexico City as exceptionally violent. Because of the interest he had in this print material, before he knew it, and "without trying to," he was reading at a more advanced level than his classmates.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸²Ibid.

¹⁸³Ibid.

¹⁸⁴Servín, *Al final del vacío*, 182.

The protagonist of *Al final del vacío* grew up in a poor family and neighborhood. One way that he found to cope with his dysfunctional family and the violence that surrounded him was by losing himself to the world of print. He tells of the first book that captured his imagination, one he found in the bookcase built into his parents' bed. While his mother watched television, he would sneak into their bedroom and struggle to squeeze from its small print whatever he could. The book's title was *Crímenes espeluznantes* ("Hair-Raising Crimes") and claimed to be a collection of true stories. He was not entirely sure what "hair-raising" meant, but the suggestive cover and the blurry images inside gave him reason to believe that it referred to something very terrible.¹⁸⁵

Over the years, he read the book from cover to cover several times, as well as many others like it that would appear in the bookcase in his parents' bedroom. They were filled with stories of "stabbed millionaires, stingy old women choked to death in their homes, prostitutes buried in the backyard by crazy men. Criminal confessions of all kinds. Prisoners in striped uniforms, cells full of murderers." By the time that he was in the fifth grade, he discovered books of a different kind: the cover of one such book showed a "native women" sitting on an island beach, smiling seductively at the reader, her large round breasts covered only by her flowing hair. Behind her, emerging from the bushes was a pirate unbuttoning his shirt. The story turned out differently than he imagined it would, but he liked it just the same. In all of these books there were no happy endings, in fact they were often tragic. The heroes, like in the pirate book he found, rarely ended up staying with the women they met in the course of their adventures. Here Servín anticipates for the reader the dark ending of his own novel. Although he builds the book around the desire his protagonist has for an absent lover, it is one that will be forever frustrated.¹⁸⁶

In *Al final del vacío*, Servín depicts Mexico City as filled with scheming individuals just waiting for the opportunity to lunge at their neighbors' throats. Servín opens his book with the sentence: "In this city all of us carry a crime. Or at least we should, because nobody lives far from an urgent desire for revenge."¹⁸⁷ In Mexico City, "one is educated through humiliations, and swindling, and learns from them without bucking, quietly, waiting for one's moment." People feed on anger and disgust. "Like many others, I detest everything that smells of religion and country." Having nothing to do with the so-called opiate of the masses or imagined communities of national belonging, Servín's protagonist finds himself pitted against everyone else. Nobody is going to convince anyone that "types like me are good for anything except for raising hell. If the law functioned, these people would be the first to fall, which is why they do not enforce it."¹⁸⁸ He continues:

I do not have any greater justification for what I say, for the life that I live alone, and with others in the same conditions. I am proof of what I am affirming. We are a hell of a group. I am no fool. I have read, traveled and learned. I especially like reading popular papers, and sometimes watch the news, how can you help it, everywhere they have a television turned on? But none of this made me atheist, it was my peers, because the more they mention God the more intent they are on

¹⁸⁵Ibid.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., 182-3.

¹⁸⁷Ibid., 9.

¹⁸⁸Ibid., 34.

killing, serving justice with their own hands. And they are right. We live in a prison with open doors, accused for obstruction. We are all condemned, no use in planning escape. Our fuck-it attitude prevents it. It is better to live by one's own means, as if not wanting to, with ears and eyes open.¹⁸⁹

Servín's protagonist is forced to make the best of what little he has. While still a child, he used the gory and lurid details he found in books to compete with other children in the neighborhood in games where they tried to outdo each other with their stories. His father abandoned him, passing him on to a friend. In this man's house, he would often entertain himself with magazines with photographs of naked women. Then when he could no longer masturbate, he would spend hours "reading articles about boats that had vanished on the high seas, unsolved crimes, cannibalism, freaks, UFOs, and prophesies of calamities." He would search through the collection of old novels, biographies, histories and almanacs, carefully choosing information with which to impress his friends and teachers.¹⁹⁰ "In the neighborhood what I knew was more than sufficient to put a distance between me and the rest of the boys." Everybody, except for the man who looked after him, thought he was smart, "and that is a good thing, because here idiots get screwed."¹⁹¹

Nevertheless, in a city where gangs, mafias, and political cliques rule, the information gained by reading does not really prepare an individual for survival. For Servín's protagonist, books ended up "rotting" the links he had with his neighborhood. By retreating into the world of print, he ended up wasting his "vital energy", distancing himself from everyone around him, especially the allies that he needed to stay alive and make a go of things.

Books opened profound sentiments of defeat. While I devoured them as if they were going out of style, they taught me an undignified approach to the world. In the beginning, they seemed like the best weapons for taking revenge for all the battles that I lost in the street. Grave, mortal wounds. I stuffed my brain with them until it was isolated from the outside [...] I am dangerous only to myself, always alert and persecuted by doubt and desertions. In the end, I have nothing. I have but an orphaned and unbalanced intelligence, without the ambition that comes from hunger or hate.¹⁹²

More than a weapon for revenge, the sordid literature that Servín's protagonist fed on nurtured his morbid fascination with his own defeat. Instead of confronting the threatening reality of the street, he created an interior world filled with lurid images. When he was young, and his mother threatened him by saying that his father would punish him when he got home, he would calm himself by paging through "a magazine with tragedies, crimes, and colored photographs of women in bikinis."¹⁹³ Later as an adult, his girlfriend would cut stories of violent crimes out of newspapers and classify and file them. "We didn't care about the rest of the information, we already knew that the country is broke and the world gone to hell."¹⁹⁴ "Generally we would make connections" between these stories "and our own lives in order to laugh a little. We are not so far

¹⁸⁹Ibid.

¹⁹⁰Ibid., 184.

¹⁹¹Ibid., 275.

¹⁹²Ibid., 260.

¹⁹³Ibid., 69.

¹⁹⁴Ibid., 76.

from those desperate and suicidal cases."¹⁹⁵ But reading this sordid material is far from therapeutic. In one scene Servín's protagonist is overcome by fear as he makes his way through the post-apocalyptic city. He is he tortured by violent mental images, some furnished by what he had read. There was, for example, "The cover of a tabloid with a young man who had been chopped into bits with a machete for raping a friend," and "passages of novels and stories he had read as an adolescent" that flashed into his mind momentarily preventing him from getting a grip on himself.¹⁹⁶ No, this genre of writing, more than giving individuals tools for living, provides the images with which they can imagine their own demise.¹⁹⁷

Fantasizing Violence

Servín gives the best insight into how sensationalist and lurid genres relate to life in the city when he describes one of his protagonist's violent and vengeful fantasies. In Mexico City, the sheer number of people and the crowded conditions, particularly as they move through public spaces, means that the individual is continually being imposed upon, and made to suffer innumerable inconveniences and indignities.

As Servín's protagonist relates the situation, on the street one is often assaulted by the stench of exhaust fumes, industrial and organic products, bodily excretions and human waste and garbage, the incessant rumble of traffic, and startling sharp sounds. Your personal space is repeatedly encroached upon. People bump into or step on you. Vendors and beggars insist incessantly. Men leer. The visual field is saturated, made worse by ubiquitous flashy packaging and advertisements. In a crowded subway car or bus, people often uncomfortably press against each other, requiring one to hold strained and awkward positions for prolonged periods through jolts and sudden stops. Emboldened by the close quarters, and the cloak of anonymity that one gains in a crowd, men will cop a feel of a woman's buttocks or breast, and thieves will help themselves to people's belongings. After days, weeks, months and years of suffering in this way, it is a wonder that more people do not snap, or lash out.

Although one can write off many of the above inconveniences as the inevitable consequence of living in a densely populated urban area, one specific class of individuals is responsible for endangering the lives of thousands. These are the driver of minibuses, part of an unregulated system of transport known as *peseros*. These *peseros* are responsible for the congestion on most principle avenues. They hold up traffic with their sudden stops and dangerously careen through the traffic as they speed to their next passenger. Each minibus is privately owned, and there are no designated stops. Because the minibus driver and his helper are dependent on the passenger fare for their livings, they fiercely compete with other minibuses to pick up the most people, flagrantly disregarding their passengers' wellbeing once they get on board. Most of these minibuses are in a notorious state of disrepair, and are often packed far beyond their capacity. Drivers will often blast their music at high volume and accidents and injuries are frequent. However, since the subway and regulated bus lines do not extend over the whole city, and taxicabs are too expensive for most people, *peseros* are the most popular form of transport in the city. Because of this, millions of people find themselves at the mercy of individuals who so

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 77.

¹⁹⁶Ibid., 103-4.

¹⁹⁷Ibid., 179.

openly treat them with disdain.

Given this situation, it is not surprising that one should harbor fantasies of taking revenge on these reckless individuals and their insolent helpers. This is the case for Servín's protagonist in *Al final del vacío*. "Public transportation is humiliating," he explains, "In silence or dozing off one has to endure sudden starts, tugs and unbearable noise, dilapidated seats, the driver's deafness and aggression when requesting a stop. Rarely does anyone, no matter how angry they might be, dare protest." He begins to carry in his backpack, thinking that he might one day use it to take out a minibus driver and his helper. After smashing their heads in he imagines telling other passengers: "See? It is a matter of having the balls enough to finish off these riffraff."¹⁹⁸ What is important to note here is not only the degree to which his fantasy of revenge follows a script given by his reading material, but even more how the reading material itself makes an appearance in the fantasy. I quote the passage at length:

Take that, son of a bitch, I've had it! And you too, worthless piece of shit. You don't want to die? Then let's have a little fun, the others would love to see you go down the aisle on all fours with this stick stuck firmly up your ass. Don't scream, you dumb shit! We are barely starting. Come here, you fag! Lick the ground with that mustached snout of yours. With two kicks to your ribs, you will understand who pays for your food and that of your gang, motherfuckers! That's it, very good, one behind the other. Now come back pigs! Fellow passengers, you can spit on them until your mouths are dry. Ladies, if one of you is having your period, please give these idiots your sanitary napkin to suck on, I promise that we will close our eyes while you prepare it... So how is it? Good, isn't it? You got hard, didn't you? Take that, and that, and that! Pissing on yourself won't help. Open your eyes, you damn fool! That girl whose ass you checked out when she got on board is calling you, don't tell me that you don't want to feel her up anymore. There, gag on her menstrual pad!... Let's see, you are going to sing the song that you forced us to listen to during the whole trip. No? Then maybe this will help you remember what your stinky little snout is good for. Just imagine what your family will think when they find out why you were wasted. Don't cry, what we are doing is what you like to read about every day in your morbid papers. That's it, nice and slow, we are about to finish. One last thing: the passengers are going to decide which of you dies first... Of course, the driver, no doubt. There, ONE, TWO. The sound of bone and teeth crushing, blood and brains splattered on the windshield and floor. Now the other one. No, no tears. Why do you scream? It would be better if you called out your route as if it was the Lord's Prayer. Say goodbye to the woman with the low neckline. Go ahead, don't stay there with your mouth open, asshole, or I will have to close it with another kick. You look so ugly bleeding like that. Alright, which photograph here in this paper do you like the best, this one of a man shot to death by a buddy of his, or this one of a lady that jumped to her death from a rooftop, or this one of the poor little devil that got his guts torn out of him at an intersection by a reckless fuck like you? You have to choose one to give us an idea of how you want to look after we finish you off with the bat. All right, I will choose for you.

¹⁹⁸Ibid., 112.

This one looks good. Here, take that, and that, and that... ..¹⁹⁹

This fantasy of retribution is not much more than a rather unoriginal appropriation of a genre of crime journalism popular in Mexico City. Servín's protagonist, by carrying a bat in his backpack, imagining how he might use it against characters he finds despicable, is honoring the "true crimes" he enjoys reading about. It is much more than a voyeuristic interest that ties him to these morbid accounts. They have become necessary for his own personal mode of existence, necessary in order for him to be able to suffer the daily indignities imposed upon him and the fear that prevents him from confronting them. He uses these fantasies to lash out and project himself violently onto the world, at least within his own imagination, pretending that he has "the balls" sufficient to enact avenging heinousness: "These fantasies, far from shaming me, unite me to the desire for blind revenge of the rabble." Once when these minibuses went on strike, we are told in Servín's novel, a gang of children targeted them for violent attacks. In so doing, these ruffians only acted on the widespread desires that the masses had but were too afraid to act upon. In the end, Servín's protagonist never carries out his fantasy. His girlfriend asked him not to do anything stupid. His father-in-law had been killed violently. "A little melodrama, and the memory" of his girlfriend's father, "and that was it." "How little it took, I realized later, for me to renounce my homicidal desires." Moreover, it is due to similar motives, he tells us, that the majority of the city's residents meekly tolerate all those daily impositions and violence.²⁰⁰

One can explain the fascination with violent and pessimistic literature as a peculiar manifestation of paranoia. This literature allows some individuals to counteract the anxiety they feel with respect to a yet unknown terrible calamity, with the certainty that they can imagine any horror that could possibly befall them. Usually such paranoia is paralyzing. If Servín's protagonist is correct, then many people in Mexico City live their lives in perpetual fear. People bite their tongues, avoid eye contact, and hang their heads, even when subject to the most intolerable humiliations. Since they can and do imagine the worst, aided by the literature they read, they avoid direct confrontation as if their lives depended on it. However, there is an even more acute stage to this condition. We see this with Servín's protagonist. The state of exception common in the city and particularly in some neighborhoods makes the strategy of avoidance less tenable. Speaking about himself he says, "I continued to be drawn in by insanity and the perverse pleasure for chaos."²⁰¹ Over the course of time, he goes from fantasizing about perpetuating acts of violence to carrying them out. Paranoia can lead from passiveness to action. What better way to protect oneself from the uncertainty of the calamity that might befall one than to become a perpetrator of it, both on others and oneself?

Statistics of Violence

It is common when we read fiction set in a city to wonder how what we read corresponds to reality. This question presupposes, however, that it is possible to speak about a city apart from its representations. We imagine an actual city out there we could compare to the city as it is portrayed. In reality, no such comparison is possible. All we have are representations of the city. The city as a whole only exists within our imagination, as a series of images. What we end up

¹⁹⁹Ibid., 112-3.

²⁰⁰Ibid., 114.

²⁰¹Ibid., 285.

doing when we seek to corroborate a representation is to compare one representation with another. We go back and forth between sign systems. Statistics is but one among many sign systems, one that is particularly well equipped to deal with the large numbers, the plurals, as Benedict Anderson called them, which are prevalent and necessary in contemporary imaginings of nations and cities.²⁰²

What is interesting here is that there is a discrepancy between these pessimistic literary accounts of Mexico City and some statistics, specifically those dealing with homicide. The national character literature and contemporary sordid publications agree on one point, that a Mexican is a person given to and fascinated by violence. If we look, however, to another literature we find that, statistically, rates of crime and violence in Mexico City have steadily decreased over the past century. In addition, compared to other cities, the statistics appear to show that the Mexican capital is not as dangerous as many believe it to be.

A comparative study that analyzes criminal records for the years 1994 and 1995 reveals that there were five more homicides per one 100,000 people in Los Angeles County than in Mexico City. That is to say that a person had a thirty-six percent greater chance of being killed in Los Angeles County than in Mexico City during these years. Moreover, for individuals between the ages of fifteen and nineteen, the probability of being murdered in Los Angeles County was over three times as high as it was in Mexico City.²⁰³ David Lida extends the comparison to other cities: "In 2004, there were 710 homicides in Mexico City, as opposed to 218 in Washington, D.C. Yet there are close to twenty million people in Mexico City and only 572,000 in the US capital. Therefore, your likelihood to get murdered in D.C. is far greater than it is here—equally true in many US cities, among them Detroit, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Phoenix, Dallas, and Las Vegas (according to 2004 statistics from the FBI)."²⁰⁴ Regardless of the statistics, however, over the course of the twentieth century, the inhabitants of Mexico City have maintained a steady level of concern with crime in their metropolis, considering it excessive and certainly greater than it is in other cities.

The Role of Literature in Perceptions of Violence

Pablo Piccato has attributed the "contradiction" between what he calls the "qualitative and quantitative evidence" to a perception of crime fed in part by a police genre, the *nota roja* described above, and one insider accounts of police corruption appearing beginning in the 1980s.²⁰⁵ "The clearest challenge to the statistical evidence of decreasing rates comes from police news, particularly the *nota roja*. Gruesome, sometimes voyeuristic descriptions reached thousands of readers through newspapers, magazines, comics, books and, more recently, television shows".²⁰⁶

Taking cues from Mexican criminology... the *nota roja* presented chronicles of criminal practices as a public service that uncovered the habits of a well-defined

202Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflecting on the origin and spread of nationalism*, 30-2.

203Hijar, Chu, and Kraus, "Cross-national comparison of injury mortality: Los Angeles County, California and Mexico City, Mexico," 117-8.

204Lida, *First stop in the New World*, 208.

205Piccato, "A Historical Perspective on Crime in Twentieth-Century Mexico City," 2.

206Ibid., 4.

sector of society, the ‘criminal population,’ to unaware citizens... the *nota roja* often presented little more than a description of the horrors and tragedy witnessed at the police station or the crime scene, and reproduced the speculations of the officials as to motivations (usually involving passion or greed), that explained crimes.²⁰⁷

In 1983, José González González, a bodyguard of the Mexico City police chief, published a book, *Lo negro del negro Durazo*, that described the corruption, violence, nepotism, and symbiosis that characterized the relationship between the police, government, and criminal networks dealing in drugs, theft, and prostitution. More than an institution to fight crime, the police of the national capital were revealed as a mafia, an organization bound by oaths and allegiances, the objectives of which were more those of extortion than prosecution, much less prevention.

Arturo Durazo Moreno, appointed by President José López Portillo, created a police force where individuals became officers not through merit, skill, aptitude, or a commitment to service, but by the outright purchase of their positions. Officers were also required to pay for their own uniforms, weapons, and bullets, as well as continue to pay periodic “fees” or kickbacks to senior officers. Understandably, police officers sought to recover their costs through a system that is known as collecting *mordidas*, “little bites” of money given by individuals to get officers to not further abuse their power, to carry out their duties, to do even the most routine of procedures, as well as to provide protection or overlook an illegal activity. When his boss fled the country after killing some members of the Columbian Cartel, González González broke the code of silence and wrote his book, confessing to having personally committed over fifty murders that he personally committed on the orders of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and other government officials.

For Piccato, then, the popularity of the Mexican police genre *nota roja*, the type of articles that Servín's protagonist and his girlfriend liked reading and talking about, and books written by authors like González González, have created in the public mind a perception not only of rampant crime, but of corrupt government and law enforcement agencies in collusion with criminal organizations. Of course, these perceptions are also based on reality. The general sense of insecurity of which they are a part, however, does not reflect the statistical chances of being violently assaulted or killed in Mexico City. Before the recent intensification in the drug wars, which has claimed the lives of thousands of people across the country, many of them innocent bystanders, most of the crime statistics for Mexico City were in fact lower than those of other large population areas throughout the Americas.

Piccato suggests that what in fact has occurred over the course of the twentieth century is that violence and crime have moved outside the bounds of the neighborhood. If at one time restitution, retribution, and punishment were negotiated at the level of the family, the community, and local authorities, today—because of the impact of the drug trade, transnational criminal networks, the amounts of money and levels of power involved, the effects of global markets—common citizens feel that violence has escaped their ambit and that they are completely helpless in confronting wrongs committed against them.²⁰⁸ They feel that they are nothing more than future victims. It is yet to be seen whether the so-called democratization of Mexican politics is

207Ibid., 4-5.

208Piccato, “A Historical Perspective on Crime in Twentieth-Century Mexico City.”

lessening this sense of powerlessness and empowering common citizens, or if “democracy” is only another incarnation of the century-old political strategy of governing with bread and circuses.

Moving Forward in “Backward” Mexico

On Friday August 28, 2005, I caught a taxi on Insurgentes Avenue. I was headed to interview the adjunct editor of *Chilango* magazine. I told the taxicab driver my destination: 956 Constituyentes Avenue. He drove us northwest across the Condesa neighborhood on Sonora Avenue. Reaching the main entrance of Chapultepec Park, we merged onto Constituyentes Avenue, moving west. Constituyentes runs along the southern border of Chapultepec Park, a more than 1,500-acre expanse of land that includes an eighteenth-century castle, a war monument, a recreational park, zoo, museums, lake and other attractions. All of this, though, was blocked from our view by a wall and fence that is intended to prevent anyone from accessing the park except through designated entrances during park hours. As we completed the three-mile distance along Constituyentes, I remember thinking to myself that the inaccessibility of the park from Constituyentes mirrored the inaccessibility of the homes to the south. Mexico City is a walled city, and on this particular stretch of avenue, human life—in the form of street vendors, pedestrians, commuters, people engaged in recreational and leisure activities—is relatively hidden from view.

Chilango is published by Grupo Editorial Expansión, which at the time had just been acquired by Time Inc., one of the world's largest magazine publishers. As we approached the offices of *Chilango*, the appearance of the buildings abruptly changed, indicating that they were entering an affluent neighborhood. Upon arrival, I stated the purpose of my visit and gave proof of my identity to the guard at the building entrance; I was ushered into a sumptuous inner courtyard which, with its fountain, landscaping and silence, seemed worlds away from the street outside. I proceeded to a waiting area where I sat on a minimalist black leather couch for a few minutes before Felipe Soto, the then adjunct editor, came out to meet me. Since that time Soto has become the general editor for *Chilango*.

The name of the magazine is a moniker for residents of Mexico City. For Mexicans living outside of the capital, it is most often used pejoratively. Until recently, longstanding residents resisted identifying themselves as *chilangos* preferring to reserve the term for recent immigrants to the capital. According to a brief study by Gabriel Zaid, *chilango* first appeared in print in 1954, in the state of Veracruz. It was perhaps in the 1980s, when Mexico City exercised the most influence over the rest of Mexico politically, economically, and culturally, that the moniker was adopted widely to express the resentment that other Mexicans had for those people coming from the capital. Since then, however, Mexico City has declined in importance.²⁰⁹ Today, as evidenced by the existence a magazine *Chilango* that portrays positive aspects of the city and its residents, the term is beginning to be assumed by some residents of Mexico City with pride.

The interview took place at a table in the courtyard. I began by asking Soto how the magazine was named. This led us to talk about how the magazine got its upbeat tone. First, Soto said the magazine's upbeat voice reflects his own personality. Secondly, before coming to Grupo Editorial

²⁰⁹Zaid, “Gentilicios Chilango.”

Expansión, Soto had worked as an editor for a magazine aimed at adolescents. With this demographic, Soto said, upbeat and "irreverent" is the tone that you have to use. Soto felt that it could also work with older readers. Finally, two months before the first issue of *Chilango* came out, a small magazine publisher, Editorial Mapas, released *dF por Travesías*. Since both magazines were targeting roughly the same market, and *dF por Travesías* came out first, the production team working on *Chilango* was forced to think more seriously about how the magazine would stand out. As Soto related it, he told his team that they needed to develop an "ideology" that would make them different from their competitor.

More generally, however, *Chilango* and *dF por Travesías* could be lumped together. They are both urban lifestyle magazines, and they are both decidedly upbeat and optimistic about the life that upper and upper-middle class individuals can enjoy in Mexico City. Soto sees himself as part of a new generation of editors, which would include the editor of *dF por Travesías*, who came into their own professionally during and after the Carlos Salinas de Gortari administration in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is not by chance that two urban lifestyle magazines, the first of their kind, both made their appearance when they did. Beginning in the 1920s, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) controlled not only Mexico's federal government but also its cultural politics. When Salinas de Gortari assumed the presidency in 1988, most believe by fraud, it became apparent that the PRI, as the official party, was divided. According to Soto, the political fracturing generated a parallel unprecedented openness in the social sphere.

It was in the late 1980s that the government allowed the first large rock concert since 1971 to be held. "Whether you think so or not, that symbolizes a change in the social structure," argued Soto. Since particularly the student massacre of 1968 in Tlatelolco, the PRI had been authoritarian and controlling. Everyone listened to the music that the media conglomerate Televisa promoted. During those years, Televisa was an instrument of the PRI. "The PRI was solemn," Soto stated. What he meant by solemn was that everyone was obliged to show deference for public officials as if they were "demigods". Soto and the editors of his generation began their professional lives as the PRI splintered apart. He is a member of the "school" that tacitly agrees that the decades of "solemnity" imposed upon Mexico by the PRI should end. In the elections of 2000, the PRI finally was voted out of power. Three years later, *Chilango* and *dF por Travesías* appeared. It was time, argued Soto, to infuse a more carefree tone into things, to move on.

ME: So you think that this change in tone is linked in some way to the defeat of the PRI?

FELIPE SOTO: Very indirectly. I believe that the defeat of the PRI is not the cause. The defeat of the PRI is a consequence [...] Things could not stay the same any longer. The world was changing and we were not. With this latest influx of Argentines, for example, many Argentines said, "I came to Mexico and I returned to the 1980s," because here one feels like they have gone back in time two decades. We lost decades to a conservatism and protectionism that kept us in a time capsule. In addition, it is only now that things begin to break open a little. And it is happening in a lot more gentle manner than how it happened in Spain after Franco. That was a much more violent break. Here the break was subtle, because we are less critical as a society, in many ways less prepared. [...] Here things change

slowly. I do not know why. Somebody would need to do a doctoral research project to find out why things change so slowly in Mexico City.

At this point in the conversation, I pointed to one of the issues of *Chilango* that was lying on the table, and referred to an article that I had read about the new vogue for loft-styled apartments in Mexico City. "Fifty years after Warhol, the versions that we see in Mexico City are not exactly lofts," reads the article. The thrust of the argument is that Mexicans have belatedly adopted loft apartments as they often belatedly adopt many cultural forms. According to the article, Mexicans don't do justice to the original and seem incapable of devising their own innovations. It is "like what happens with manchego-styled cheese" in Mexico, continues the article, there are now "loft-styled apartments". You can tell the difference when you try the original. As a reader, we are expected to know that Mexico's manchego-styled cheese is nothing like the original from Spain.

The carefree tone that Soto gives his magazine with, comes with a healthy dose of self-deprecation. I suppose this is what Soto means by "irreverent". The freedom that Soto provides his readers is the freedom to laugh at themselves, or more precisely to laugh at those Mexicans who are not as privileged in knowledge, perspective, or means as are his readers. The opening editorial for the issue on loft-styled apartments is illustrated with a picture of a model sitting on a toilet with her panties down, strung between her shins. She smiles at the reader from behind an issue of *Chilango*. Behind her head are uncurtained windows, and as far as one can tell she is not in a separate room but in the main area of a loft apartment. The photograph's caption reads, "Another little detail: Privacy, privacy, what people refer to by using the word, well, there isn't much."

The editorial makes the point that "lofts are not for everyone." Nevertheless, the smiling model, and the individuals and couples photographed to illustrate the article in their loft-inspired apartments, again with their smiles and their new and modern surroundings, advertise to the reader that living in an apartment like theirs could be the thing to do. Living in a loft might not be for everyone in Mexico City, "but those who have cast off their constraints say that a loft can change your life, that you can enjoy it to the point that you no longer think about living in a house or conventional apartment." Halfway through the article there is a text-box that lists the qualities that someone needs to live in one of these new apartments. The first item on the list: "You are a good candidate for a loft if... It doesn't bother you if people see you naked through the window." The presupposition is that the residents of Mexico City tend to be prudish about their bodies, certainly as compared to the residents of New York. The article suggests that for those who are able to transcend this prudishness, there are different and maybe even better ways of living available to them.

In a city where the minimum wage is five dollars a day, not many of *Chilango's* readers would be able to afford a \$60,000 to \$365,000 apartment. For working and middle-class readers, the article provides a glimpse into this form of dwelling. If only they would some day have enough money, they too could choose to live in such a place. Furthermore, on a more mundane level, these readers are perhaps left with a sense that there are positive things to be gained from working on overcoming their inhibitions and their resistance to change. The images provided are certainly attractive. On the other hand, for those readers who do have the means to participate in this new vogue for loft-styled apartments in Mexico City, the article provides information and

considerations useful for making a decision, including even the names of real estate companies for different neighborhoods. The article demonstrates that in Mexico City one can live a life like the one people do in the most developed cities of the world. Like the famous lofts in New York, in Mexico City there are now loft-styled apartments, adapted and designed by Mexican architects, made available, along with an ever-growing panoply of goods and services, to consumers with an above-average disposable income.

Creating Urban Identity

If Paris, London, and New York are all ahead of Mexico City in terms of the quantity and quality of consumer and artistic offerings, then the first step that residents of Mexico City need to take is to begin to develop a positive self-image of themselves and their city, to value what is good and worthwhile, and to reward those businesses that provide them with higher quality goods and services. "When we began the magazine, I told everyone, 'We need to formulate an ideology for this magazine.' Look, when Billy Joel sang the song 'New York State of Mind,' in the 1970s, New Yorkers had for decades known themselves to be New Yorkers, thought of themselves as New Yorkers, to the degree that they could say that they were in a New York state of mind." Not only did residents of New York know what Billy Joel meant, had an idea what a New York state of mind was, but they were proud to be associated with it.

"We didn't have any of that. This city was chaos." By chaos, Soto means "a system that has not yet been named." There has been nothing to organize, structure or codify Mexico City. "So we started this magazine as an experiment to codify the city. Of course, there are thousands of ways to codify it. We had to choose one." Soto describes how initially scores of journalists and writers wanted to come on board, each of them with their own proposal. They proposed topics "which invariably included violence, street children, pollution, garbage disposal, corruption, the subway, traffic, and other obvious subjects." "Of course," Soto would tell them, "all of this is part of Mexico City," but "if that is what people see up front," if alarming topics are allowed to strike the tone for the periodical, it "will not be financially viable because nobody buys a magazine that has on its front cover traffic congestion."

During the 1990s, there were in fact two previous attempts to create an urban lifestyle magazine in Mexico City, *Macrópolis* and *Laberinto Urbano*. "I have there my collection of *Macrópolis*," Soto said as he motioned back toward his office. He uses it as an example of how not to do things. Over the life of the magazine, its covers dealt with traffic, poverty, street children, prostitutes in the Merced neighborhood, and police corruption. "It is obvious that people bought a few issues and then said, 'Enough! Too much pessimism!'" The magazines ultimately failed, and Mexico City continued to go "without being codified, because it was being codified according to what was negative. It was being codified according to the products of chaos." In contrast, Soto and his group have created a magazine that "talks about things that make it worthwhile to live in the city. Those are the things that really do create a code."

Soto imagines his magazine is provoking conversations about what it means to live in Mexico City, sparking self-awareness among residents of the capital. "Those of us who write" for *Chilango*, explains Soto, write about "how we would like to define ourselves. No? If we started to define ourselves as swindlers, or opportunists, and starving good-for-nothings, thieves, we are

never going to get anywhere." Why shouldn't the residents of Mexico City be able to define themselves positively, by what they like about themselves and their city? Soto has been criticized for being an elitist, and for presenting a city that does not exist. However, the truth is that Santa Fe, a neighborhood known as a business hub and for its large mall, is just as much a part of Mexico City as Neza (Nezahualcóyotl), a municipality known for entrenched poverty, corruption, and violence. "If we concentrate on Neza, Valle de Chalco, all that part of the city, Ixtapalapa, Ixtacalpo, all that poor and brutal part where they lynch policemen and all that, there will unfortunately, or not, be chaos. That is life. Order comes from zones where capital moves, especially where there are people with leisure time."

The Condesa neighborhood is the best point of departure for implementing Soto's theory of trickle-down order. People in that neighborhood, he explains, have a lot of leisure time. They work as servers in upscale restaurants to support their bohemian lifestyles. "By beginning with that culture," things with *Chilango* magazine are beginning "to move little by little." The intent is to channel the positive self-image that formed in the Condesa and other affluent neighborhoods, using it to influence "thoughts on the nature of the city" as a whole. People have criticized *Chilango* as being a guide to the Condesa neighborhood and not the city as a whole. What is overlooked by this exaggeration is that many of the most interesting venues and happenings, for residents like Soto, his writers, and some of their readers, do in fact occur in and around that neighborhood. What will the impact of *Chilango* be? Soto is not sure. "In a city with twenty million people we sell around 20,000 issues every month. That is a lot, but if you think about it, with 20,000 copies we are selling only to zero-point-one percent of the city's population."

What does Soto know about the people who buy his magazine? "Well, Wal-Mart gives us, for example, a list of products bought by those who buy *Chilango*. That gives us an *insight*."²¹⁰ Evidently, people who buy *Chilango* also buy *TV Notas*. *TV Notas* is a weekly that carries stories about the rich and famous in Mexico. It is the most widely sold magazine in the country, with a distribution of over 250,000 throughout the country. Furthermore, like *Chilango*, the people who read *TV Notas* are at both extremes of the socioeconomic spectrum. Working and middle-class demographics like to read about the lives of people they know from newspapers, radio, movies and television. The rich and famous like to read about themselves and their peers. "The Wal-Mart that is in Bosques de las Lomas and the one in Neza order the same quantity of *Chilango* and the two sell just as many issues." Bosques de las Lomas is the affluent neighborhood next door to Editorial Grupo Expansión. People who buy *Chilango* also buy bottled water from the companies Ciel and Bonafont. "They buy whole wheat bread. They are people who buy healthy things, things from the delicatessen, and other things like that." People use *Chilango* magazine as "a guide to live a more optimal life in the city." They are people who tell themselves, "I am not going to buy fatty foods. I am going to buy healthy things because I want to live well." *Chilango* "is not a health magazine, but it does tell you how to live."

Two Available Paths

In a series of five weblog entries, Soto tells of his first two novels.²¹¹ Even though he said that the

210 Soto, while being interviewed in Spanish, specifically, used the English word "insight".

211 The first appeared on the 4th and the last on the 27th of October, 2007, in Soto's blog

<http://pordefinir.wordpress.com>.

upbeat tone of *Chilango* emanated from his own personality, he apparently is capable of pessimistic writing too. In 1999, for his first manuscript, he won a \$7,500 prize and was published by a small publisher. The book was poorly distributed and received little notice. Some websites, he writes, have his book classified under the genre of horror. "It is not a horror novel. But maybe it is horrific," writes Soto.²¹² The renowned author Vicente Leñero read Soto's second manuscript and was so impressed that he himself submitted it to Alfaguara, a publisher that hosts a literary contest named after him. The publisher evidently was not as impressed by Soto's manuscript as Leñero had been, and suggested that he should submit it to a lesser contest, one that awards \$20,000 instead of a \$175,000.²¹³

Soto relates how the contest affected him. His book was shortlisted and selected as one of the final three. The stress of the contest left him unable to sleep, and suffering from bouts of nausea. In the end, he did not win the award. Hoping to have his manuscript published just the same, he contacted the editor. After a few days, she summoned him into her office and gave him the publisher's judgment. Soto writes, "It read that, in effect, it was a great novel, but that it was so obscene, pessimistic and provoked such hopelessness that it was not convenient for a publisher like Alfaguara to publish it."²¹⁴ The same editor that gives *Chilango* magazine its upbeat and tone to ensure its success on the market, who believes that order comes from the free movement of capital and that it trickles down from above, is capable in his more literary writing, if we are to believe him, of a pessimism and hopelessness unacceptable even to a publisher of literature.

Years ago, when he was only twenty-two, Soto believed in poetry. "I believed that books would beckon you and that you would come to them through predestination." That is why he gave a lot of importance to the fact that one day he stumbled upon a volume of poetry by Gerardo Deniz. After that, he quickly read four other books by him. Deniz' poetry impressed Soto so much that he decided to do his bachelor's thesis on him. He called Deniz's editor, got the poet's telephone number, and made an appointment to meet him at his house. "I imagined him living in an old but sunny apartment, with an impressionable young woman at his side." As it turned out:

Deniz was sixty years old and a wobbly giant of a man who lived in a tiny apartment. He had, I am not exaggerating, encyclopedias even in his refrigerator. There were fingerprints visible in the dust that had accumulated on his furniture. He drank heavily and was followed by an old matted cat. He lived by translating from twenty some languages—I am still not exaggerating. In his youth he wanted to be a chemist but turned out to be too much of genius for that. He began his career as a poet when he was thirty-seven years old, resigned to failure [...] He seemed to me a man who was painfully alone, bitter, dedicated to the sport of hating [...] So that is what a writer is like, I thought to myself, not the glamorous figure that I had imagined. That is yet another reason why I am not a writer.²¹⁵

By his own account, Soto has wavered between two paths. Years ago, he had been drawn to Deniz' melancholic verses. He wrote a novel that was pessimistic and bleak. Nevertheless, perhaps because he is less "resigned to failure" and obscurity than Deniz, he decided to edit a

212Soto Viterbo, "De por qué no soy escritor (1a parte)."

213Soto Viterbo, "De por qué no soy escritor (3a parte)."

214Soto Viterbo, "De por qué no soy escritor (3a parte)"; Soto Viterbo, "De por qué no soy escritor (4a parte)."

215Soto Viterbo, "De por qué no soy escritor (la precuela parte 1)."

magazine and write articles validated by market success. Soto and Deniz, for my purposes here, serve as two types, each on opposite ends of a spectrum that comprises the options available to writers in Mexico City. At one end there are writers like Soto who may aspire to be accepted by the gatekeepers of the literary sanctum, but content themselves and find virtue in writing for the many. At the other end there are obscure writers like Deniz, who content themselves with critical acclaim. Excluded from this spectrum are the literary rock stars like Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, and Gabriel García Márquez. To be a rock star or literary god, is not an option for the Sotos and the Denizens.

A Pessimist's Manifesto

By giving *Chilango* a celebratory tone, Soto has either misread history or chosen to shirk the responsibility that comes with living in the present moment. At least that is what Alejandro Rozado, sociologist, film critic, psychoanalyst, and a fellow native of Mexico City, would argue. Unrepentant pessimist that he is, Rozado feels that the “intuitive perception of the profound artist” cannot but realize that today we live during “the senile phase of this civilization.”²¹⁶ Maybe that would explain the tenor of Soto’s failed novel; maybe it also explains why the writing of Servín and much of what passes as literature in Mexico City is so dismal. For Rozado, each period in history demands that individuals do the tasks necessary at that particular moment to realize “the spiritual potentialities of society.”

Rozado argues that we have two options: “a) join the forces and enormous resources allotted to the gigantic corpse on life support, paid for by the complete annihilation of what is left of spiritual life”; or “b) join the ethical forces directed at dismantling the destruction, toward unmasking ‘progress without limit’ and its catastrophic aftermath.” According to Rozado, “Western culture has realized itself historically. Its spirit has fulfilled all areas of human life.” Now, however, it is in decline. “Individuals are losing their subjectivity and losing their souls and vitality to large apparatuses of democratic totalitarianism: political bureaucracy, large international financial corporations, ubiquitous organized crime and the even more ubiquitous mass communication media.” There are literally, he believes, zones where there are “no living souls: only people, roaming through streets and buildings, vacated of their creative and spiritual sap.” The only option available, dignified of the civilization that we inherit, is to stand up against this tendency.²¹⁷

“The night of civilization will be long, lasting still for some centuries. What ultimately will come—if anything—will depend on circumstances alien and unpredictable for us.” The only way to maintain one’s subjectivity in these times is through poetry that has a sense of history, not a poetry that versifies life but one that fuses the tasks of “philosopher, scientist, social justice fighter, historian, sociologist, poet, and even prophet.” Writers need to use “the magnetic word to name the extreme to which the era is arriving.” They need to oppose “false optimism of progress.” “From the terrace of the poetic world strapping beings are forged, tempered by the old radical struggles, their achievements and failures. Those beings are nothing if not pessimistic.” Pessimism is the only ethical attitude possible today, Rozado contends, “the only sensible and

²¹⁶Rozado, “La noche de la civilización: tesis por una decadencia con sentido histórico,” 67.

²¹⁷*Ibid.*, 67-8.

vital manner of moving in the decadence.”²¹⁸

Death is unavoidable. The only choice we have is over how we wish to die. There is the insensible death of those who join up with the terrible machinery that threatens all worthwhile human qualities, or there is the sensible death worthy of our great civilization in advanced stages of senescence. For those who choose the latter, solitude “ceases to be a calamity and becomes an intimate valiant act.” In being exiled by society, poetic individuals with a sense of history are forced to form their own small circles of colleagues and friends, teach themselves, nurture their critical senses. To be poetic in this way implies embracing the historical moment:

We shall die our way. Not theirs. It is the last problem faced by civilized life. It is an ethical matter. Also aesthetic. [...]

We do not want to form a “dead poets society,” we are the poets of a dead society.²¹⁹

Rogelio Villarreal formed one circle of cynics in Mexico City around the magazine he edits, *Replicante*. He met Rozado nearly thirty years ago. They had both recently abandoned the Mexican Communist Party. “We were joined by a species of critical and existential dejection,” writes Rogelio. Even a quarter of a century later, “We realized that we still lived the exile of disbelievers... We agreed that we live the decadence of the West and that, in order to confront it, there is nothing else to do than find the best manner to perish...”²²⁰ After reconnecting, Rogelio published Rozado’s manifesto in the third issue of his magazine. It is evident that Rogelio sees it as an expression of his own point of view and the tone he wishes to give the publication. In each issue he publishes dozens of pessimistic pieces, by Ari, Servín, and others that will yet appear in this dissertation.

Around the same time that I interviewed Felipe Soto of *Chilango*, Rogelio told me about the article relating his meetings with Rozado. What struck me was that Soto and Rogelio could not be further apart in their editorial projects. Rogelio’s article is a eulogy to Gerardo Deniz, the very poet that had disappointed Soto with his painful solitude, and bitterness.²²¹ Forgetting for a moment the handful of literary gods who have presided over Mexico City, this is the spectrum of options open to writers: Soto at one pole, and Servín, Rozado, Rogelio and Deniz the another.

Winners and Losers

A few months after my interview with Soto, Rogelio published an article on Mexico City written by his cousin Héctor Villarreal. The article was everything Soto has argued urban writing should not be. It identified the city by its hellish traffic, pollution, and bad urban planning, and corruption. Let us remember, writes Villarreal, that the Aztec metropolis Tenochtitlán, the city that has now become Mexico City, was defeated by a handful of Spaniards with a few cannons and a lot of ambition. “Things have not changed much since then: fatally, this is a city of many losers and few winners.” There is no hope. For Villarreal, there is only desolation, from one extreme of the urban area to the other. The dilapidated dwellings that many live in, the crumbling

²¹⁸Ibid., 68-9.

²¹⁹Ibid., 69.

²²⁰Villarreal, “Gerardo Deniz vs. Max Mordon (y la poética de la historia),” 25.

²²¹Villarreal, “Gerardo Deniz vs. Max Mordon (y la poética de la historia).”

infrastructure, the lack of public services, the 14,000 street children, the 10,000 people living in garbage dumps, the lack of investment in public transportation, the astonishing dependence on the informal economy, all emanate from the “corroded” spirit of Mexico City’s inhabitants. “Corruption is not only a problem for the authorities, it is the very marrow of the *chilango*’s manner of being. It is swindling as lifestyle.”²²² This precisely is the definition of *chilango* that Soto is working against.

Think about the smiling people photographed for the article in *Chilango* about loft apartments in Mexico City. They are at the top of the socioeconomic pyramid. They have cars, and maybe even drivers. They are known to use their cars even to go only a couple of blocks. They have access to special parking lots and use valets. Middle-class residents will make great sacrifices to have that most conspicuous of status symbols, the car. They will spend hours washing and waxing cars in the street as if it was a “sublime experience”.²²³ A visitor to Mexico City can quickly appreciate the extreme discrepancies in wealth by observing the cars people drive. However, even owners of decrepit decades-old Volkswagen Beetles drive with the satisfaction that comes from knowing that they are not the lumpen who risk their lives riding bicycles, walking, or depending on the vagaries of public transportation.

The clearest proof of Mexico City as a city of losers, and the one that Villarreal concludes his article with, is given by the legions at the bottom. You can see them traveling on the subway. They are “filthy and foul; many with evident disfigurements, physical defects, physically and mentally ill, multitudinous blemishes of a public health and social system that does not provide the minimum attention and services demanded by human dignity.” Beggars go from one car to the next, “of all types, child fakirs who throw themselves onto broken pieces of glass, destitute ‘adults’, all leftovers of ‘social programs’ of neoliberal and populist governments, who apparently do not attend to those who are not liable to be taken to vote since they do not have a permanent address or voter’s card.”²²⁴

You can see the losers packed into the thousands of minibuses congesting the principle avenues, and here Villarreal concurs with Servín: “In the city of honorable defeats... every night thousands of minibuses return an army of losers to their dwellings; depressed... people worn down by long hours and deplorable workdays of poorly paid labor... burdened with discomfort... terrified of losing their lives with a stray bullet because some idiot resisted having his plastic watch or telephone with some games on it stolen from him.”²²⁵

A Context for Postnationalism

Imagine a country torn apart by civil war, beginning in 1911, that left more than two million people dead. Political leaders, generals, local strongmen, and bandits vied for power and wealth. During the nine years of intense unrest no less than eleven individuals passed through the president's office. In 1917, a constitutional convention dominated by leftists crafted a new constitution. Just over a decade later, the president formed an official party with the intent of bringing stability to a still tenuous political situation. In 1934, president Lázaro Cárdenas

²²²Villarreal, “La ciudad de la esperanza,” 81.

²²³Ibid., 79.

²²⁴Ibid., 82.

²²⁵Ibid.

implemented, for the first time, many of the redistributive provisions of the aforementioned constitution. In 1938, he nationalized foreign oil companies and Mexican reserves. That same year, Cárdenas also integrated all the principal worker unions into the official party, giving it the corporatist structure that would keep the party in power until the close of the century.

It was in the 1930s, during the Cárdenas regime, that the Mexican narrative of national unity was given its purest and most compelling formulation. The narrative is displayed in the mural *Mexico Through the Centuries* painted by Diego Rivera in the main staircase of the National Palace. Like the official party, the narrative is assimilationist. In the mural, along the bottom of the north wall, pre-Columbian groups are at war with each other. Further up the wall, there are images of an Aztec monarch and deity, pyramids, and an idealized vision of the Valley of Mexico before the arrival of Europeans. The base of the west wall portrays the Spanish and their Native American allies defeating the inhabitants of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec metropolis Mexico City was built over. Spanish clergy are shown forcing Catholicism onto Native Americans, as Spanish soldiers send the vanquished to labor in mines and construction projects. Moving up further, the mural shows events and personalities of the colonial period and the first century of Mexican independence, culminating at the very top with the civil war, known today as the Mexican Revolution.

The last wall, on the south side of the staircase, is the most ideological portion of the mural. At the bottom, Rivera painted his wife, Frida Kahlo, and her sister distributing communist literature to workers. Rivera filled the wall with images referencing various scenes of class conflict. At the very top is Karl Marx showing Mexican workers the way to a harmonious future. Marx's materialist dialectic, for Rivera, becomes the basis for national synthesis. The Aztecs overcame other Mesoamerican tribes. The Spanish subjugated the Aztecs. Catholicism superseded native beliefs. Liberals displaced the Church and conservatives. Oppressed peasants rallied around the slogan "Land and Liberty". Workers defeated greedy and decadent capitalists to institute socialism. All of them, all actors, classes, and groups are represented in Rivera's mural. The narrative subsumes them all.

The communism of Rivera and many other intellectuals of the time, in fact, was only one of many and often conflicting ideologies that were assimilated by the one-party Mexican state. A more accurate representation of nationalist history would have put Cárdenas in the place of Marx. It was he, after all, who ushered in an unprecedented two decades of relative peace, unity and prosperity known as the "Mexican Miracle". In 1950, when Octavio Paz published his analysis of Mexico's national character, he already suspected that the national experiment might not be working. Twenty years later, when he wrote a rejoinder to his study, he was unequivocal: the state-guided project of national development had failed to overcome the profound divisions between Mexicans, principally that between those with the means for attaining standards of living comparable to those of industrialized nations and those without. Authoritarianism in Mexico, argued Paz, thwarted what could be gained through truly democratic national development, that is development that touched all sectors of the Mexican population.²²⁶

The 1960s was a period of heightened worker and student mobilization that climaxed in the 1968 massacre of Tlatelolco. Most importantly, during this time the beliefs of politicians and the intelligentsia began to diverge. Whereas earlier they had eagerly collaborated in the nation-

²²⁶Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*.

building project, during the 1970s and early 1980s the government began to use coercive methods to quiet criticisms coming from the increasingly restless journalists and intellectuals. In 1985, the government responded poorly to the earthquake that had caused billions of dollars in infrastructural damage and killed between 5,000 and 10,000 people in Mexico City. Opposition organizations, those not belonging to the official state Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), stepped in and played important roles in relief efforts, and rebuilding. After the earthquake, the PRI never regained its hegemony in the capital. In the election of 1988, the residents of Mexico City voted for Lázaro Cárdenas' son Cuauhtémoc, who had resigned from his father's party to lead a left-of-center coalition consisting mostly of other party defectors.

Even before the earthquake, dramatic industrial growth in Monterrey and Guadalajara began to challenge Mexico City's economic preeminence in the country. Whereas the capital had been the primary destination for people from other areas, during the 1980s people started moving in greater numbers to cities throughout Mexico and the United States. What was particularly unprecedented was that residents of Mexico City too began to leave the city looking for better opportunities elsewhere. In the general elections of 1988, the PRI encountered their greatest challenge in sixty years. They lost four seats in the Senate, thirty-nine seats in Congress, and their presidential candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, was declared the winner only after the ballot tabulation system suspiciously crashed.

Recognizing serious challenges to his party and his presidency, Salinas de Gortari implemented a national development program that directed nearly \$20 million to building and refurbishing schools, hospitals, roads, water and power lines, and thousands of community stores, and granting millions of property titles. Furthermore, Salinas sought to foster support among intellectuals, through the giving of awards and positions. It worked for a time. A wave of national optimism swept Mexico like it had not for decades. Using economic reforms and the North American Free Trade Agreement, Salinas, a Harvard-trained economist, and his team of technocrats, was going to usher Mexico into the elite club of first world nations.

By 1994, however, serious tears in the national fabric became apparent. On New Years a ragtag army of Tzotzils, Tzeltals, Chols, and Tojolabals took over a handful of towns in the southern state Chiapas. From one day to the next the degree to which Mexico was divided became evident. One result of the Chiapas uprising was the formation, that same year, of the Nation Indigenous Congress that brought together Native American organizations around the country. Its slogan "Never again a Mexico without us." Native Americans used their voice to protest their exclusion from the national project. Furthermore, the Chiapas uprising marked the resurgence of the militant left that the government had forced underground in the 1960s and 1970s. Many Marxist and socialist intellectuals, during the 1970s and 1980s, had gone into the countryside to organize unions, community self-help organizations, and guerrilla groups. With the uprising in Chiapas, these organizations began participating in discussions on the national stage. Their very existence called into question the legitimacy of the state-sanctioned party that called itself revolutionary and claimed to speak for all Mexicans.

Under Salinas de Gortari, the PRI was not able to overcome the challenges it faced. Unsurprisingly, he focused on economic solutions. An increased number of jobs and economic growth were going to provide the basis for an elevated level of wellbeing, bringing Mexicans together through prosperity. Salinas privatized many state-run corporations, took measures to

make Mexico more attractive to investors, and signed a free-trade agreement with the United States and Canada. However, in January 1994, the last year of his term, there was the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas. Evidently, Salinas' project of national development had not been as effective as hoped. In March, the PRI's candidate for president, Luis Donaldo Colosio, was assassinated while campaigning in Tijuana. In September, the secretary-general of the PRI, who was also Salinas' former brother-in-law and a close associate, was also assassinated. For most analysts, these assassinations demonstrated the degree to which the party had been corrupted and the severity of its internal fractures. Because of the unrest, investors began placing larger risk premiums on Mexican assets.

In an election year tradition, Salinas sought to shore up votes for the PRI through increased spending financed in part by issuing bonds indexed to the US dollar. These bonds, along with Salinas's policy of artificially maintaining the value of the peso, ended up depleting the Mexican government's dollar reserves. Given the drop in confidence among investors, Salinas was unable to roll over a large portion of the debt he had accrued, forcing his successor to float the peso on the international currency market in December 1994, only weeks after assuming power. The peso immediately lost half of its value. Mexico's economy went into recession, and Salinas, who had aspired to win the leadership of the World Trade Organization by his economic record in Mexico, fled the backlash, exiling himself in Dublin, Ireland.

The economy recovered but the PRI did not. Furthermore, there was now a greater divide between Mexico City and the rest of the country than there had been. In 1997, the elected office of mayor was created for the capital. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, of the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and 1988 presidential became Mexico City's first mayor. While the majority of the population moved to the right, as evidenced in subsequent general elections, Mexico City moved even further to the left. The residents of all other major cities, including Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Tijuana, during that period elected mayors from the Christian and pro-business National Action Party (PAN). In 2000, Vicente Fox Quesada of the PAN won the presidency, ending the PRI's hold on the federal government.

Much has been said and published about the recent democratization of Mexican politics. The idea is that in the 2000 elections, Mexican voters deposed a party that had dominated national politics for more than over seventy years. Furthermore, in so doing, the Mexican electorate sparked a healthy countrywide competition between the three major political parties. It is true that Fox's election inspired a general optimism among Mexicans. People from across the political spectrum and throughout the country supported Fox in the belief that simply removing the PRI from power would have a cleansing effect on the Mexican political system, ending the corruption and authoritarianism that for so long had been associated with that party's hold on power. However, this optimism, it must be pointed out, was of a different kind than the national mood during the Lázaro Cárdenas administration in the 1930s, and even that during the first years of the Salinas de Gortari administration.

State Nationalism and Intellectuals

In giving the PRI its defining structure, subsuming within one party all the important worker unions, by nationalizing oil production, and implementing wide-ranging redistributive measures,

Cárdenas inspired a country of individuals to see themselves as part of a collective project. Intellectuals and artists were encouraged to come on board and create a narrative for catalyzing the national imagination. This national populism was the policy of the official party and was enacted to some degree or another by all administrations over the subsequent few decades. It reached a climax, finally, with the administration of Luis Echeverría, from 1970 to 1976. Echeverría enacted the largest redistribution of land since Cárdenas, nationalized mining and electrical power industries, adopted an anti-imperial stance against the United States, and voiced his support for Salvador Allende in Chile and the cause of Palestinians. What distinguished the Echeverría administration from that of Cárdenas was Echeverría's heavy hand against independent worker mobilizations, student protests, and dissent among intellectuals. Echeverría has been widely held responsible for two student massacres which occurred in Mexico City, known as the Tlatelolco Massacre in 1968, as he was then the Secretary of the Interior, and the Corpus Christi Massacre in 1971, as he was president. He also mobilized the army against guerilla groups and increased defense spending on counter-insurgency measures.

One could view Salvador Novo, chronicler of Mexico City as a model of a nationalist intellectual in the 1930s and 1940s. People like him helped create a mood of optimism during the Cárdenas administration and the subsequent years of the Mexican Miracle. In his later years, however, Novo came to be seen as a syncophant. While public support waned, Novo had continued to enthusiastically support Mexican presidents up to and including Echeverría. Unlike Novo, Octavio Paz typified the conscientious and independent-minded intellectual. After the student massacre in 1968, for example, he protested by resigning as ambassador to India. Later in life, however, he became a model for those who fell in line with Salinas de Gortari. After the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in 1994, for example, Paz famously criticized the movement. After years of disagreements with the left, he spent the last years of his life viewed as an elitist intellectual on the right of the political spectrum. His position in Mexican letters was filled in part by Enrique Krauze who assumed the editorship of Paz's periodical project, the literary magazines *Vuelta* and *Letras Libres*.

The optimism of the Cárdenas administration was built around a bottom-up revolutionary rhetoric. The leap that Cárdenas asked Mexicans to make was to imagine that the government was bringing the population together and governing in the best interest of everyone. The optimism of the Salinas administration, by contrast, came from a trickle-down rhetoric. Salinas and his technocrats lauded the free market as the key to prosperity. The big difference between the two periods of optimism was that the Cárdenas national project was broad-based and made use of the so-called cultural industry. By privatizing governmental corporations and imposing free-market logic even on governmental financing and management of the media and the arts, Salinas set a precedent for a governmental retreat from active involvement in the creation of national content. Free trade agreements, economic reforms, and investment capital, of themselves do not determine national sentiments. By retaining only a handful of legitimizing clichés, and abandoning the rest of the national narrative to cultural creators and marketers, the government has left the management of nationalism to the market. National sentiment today in Mexico is little more than just another commodifiable sentiment, like the desire for companionship, or the desire to be successful; it can be associated with goods and services through marketing campaigns.

The extreme to which this development has gone was seen in the 2000 election, where a campaign built around the nebulous concept of change ushered in a president who had not elaborated a coherent economic argument about how that change would come about. The election was more a battle of brands. On one side was the old PRI brand which was tainted by years of authoritarianism, corruption, and the mismanagement of the economy, and on the other, the PAN, newly branded by some of the most sophisticated marketers in Mexico. Vicente Fox, before becoming governor of his state of Guanajuato, was been the president of Coca Cola and credited with a successful campaign that saw Coca Cola beat out Pepsi as the most consumed soft drink in Mexico. Years before the brand to defeat had been Pepsi, now it was the PRI.

The latest expression of the populist politicking that was for so long associated with the PRI came in the elections of 2006. López Obrador, before becoming the presidential candidate for the PRD, was the mayor of Mexico City. His campaign was celebrated in the capital as the first opportunity since the elections of 1988 to roll back the federal government's neoconservative economic policies. Unsurprisingly, López Obrador received enthusiastic support from older intellectuals on the left, notably Carlos Monsiváis and Elena Poniatowska, both associated with the mobilizations of 1968. Meanwhile, their colleagues, from roughly the same generation but on the right, of course, were disgusted by the way that López Obrador pandered to the masses.

The important point here is that the young generation of writers that I worked with, who came of age after 1968, even though they hold political opinions that could place them on the left, were uniformly unimpressed by López Obrador. As intellectuals, they adopted their métier during a period when the government and political parties were regarded with distrust. The Mexican Miracle long exhausted, these writers lived through the economic and political crisis that defined the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Not only has the national narrative grown old, it now does not inspire much interest from intellectuals. After a century of promises of national development, Mexico is more divided than ever. Furthermore, there is no credible leader, not even a contemporary literary genius to guide such an intellectual project. This is the generation of postnational writers. They are seemingly exiled in their own nation, a nation that they feel no longer exists. What exactly should bind them to the thousands and millions of people who they happen to share a territory with but who do not read anything they write?

In fact, Villarreal frames his article on Mexico City, which I cite earlier, as a commentary on López Obrador. The throngs in the capital who swooned at the sight of the PRD candidate disgust Villarreal. He comments on a celebrated detail among some of his supporters, López Obrador drove a Nissan Tsuru, a relatively cheap downgraded Sentra that is still built in Mexico, when he could have driven most anything he wanted. His modesty, proved nothing more to the masses of “losers” living in the capital, scoffed Villarreal, than his Christ-like divinity. What the inhabitants of Mexico City yearn for is a savior. In their servile submission to López Obrador, they but give evidence of the degree to which they are intellectually and physically maimed and degenerate. In this respect, Soto shares with Villarreal a low opinion of the majority of the population in Mexico City. They entertain no romantic notions about the lives of poor or working-class people. The difference with Soto is that he is content that his magazine *Chilango* is sold in Neza and other poor districts. As far as his own lifestyle is concerned, however, he is happy to base it in the Condesa neighborhood and enjoys a level of existence that is only available to the city's more affluent residents.

Mexico City as Market

Mexico City is in many ways nothing more than an immense market. There are locales of all kinds. Some vendors buy or rent space inside buildings. Some meet with clients and close business deals in restaurants, bars or cafés. Others conduct business from a small area on the sidewalk or park where they can set up stands, sell wares, and provide services. Then there are those who are mobile, who peddle on the street, in parks, between vehicles at stoplights, or go directly to potential customers where they live, in their moments of leisure, or at their place of employment. Hawkers take advantage of captive customers crowded into subway cars. Beggars are no different. They deal in piteous conditions, selling indulgences. Everything seems to be for sale in Mexico City, including love, friendship, and favors. Everyone sells high, buys low, and poaches and pirates what they can. It is not by happenstance that residents of the city have gained a reputation for being swindlers.

If Mexico City is a market, then the print form that best reveals it as such is the magazine. A quick study of the covers in a magazine rack reveals that most of the content comes from elsewhere, as does so much of the merchandise that reaches market. Inside the magazines there are advertisements; even articles often contain complementary copy, paid for by endorsements of products and services. Readers are sold information, scintillating tidbits, a view of other peoples' lives, lifestyles, and all the products that one can imagine. Advertisers are sold access to the readers of these magazines. Those who translate content into Spanish, as well as those who write original local content, are all fundamentally marketers, copywriters making commodities attractive and salable to the residents of Mexico City.

One article covering the boom in magazine production reports that the transnational magazine publisher Condé Nast decided to publish a "Mexicanized" edition of its lifestyle magazine GQ because of the attractiveness of the Mexico City market: 450 million dollars paid to magazine publishers by advertisers, a 10 to 12 percent return on investments, and an 18 percent annual rate of growth.²²⁷ Another article states, based on research conducted by MERC, that 23 million magazines are read each month in the Mexican capital.²²⁸ While other magazines, such as *Donde Ir* and *Tiempo Libre*, provide event calendars and guides to restaurants and night life, it is *Chilango* magazine and its now defunct competitor *dF por Travesías* that more fully fulfill the function of urban lifestyle magazine with their journalistic content.

From a marketing perspective, the existence of urban lifestyle magazines is evidence of a more differentiated market. Magazines distributed throughout the country are not ideal advertising venues for businesses that are either limited to Mexico City or want to target that population. Moreover, *Chilango* magazine, with its upbeat and "irreverent" tone, and relatively broad readership, gives advertisers a very different kind of vehicle than does *Replicante* with its critical and pessimistic take on things, read as it is by a small but discerning circle. Poets, in particular, and literary writers in general, are known for disparaging the world of pecuniary concerns. Nevertheless, is it not true that they are their own brand, selling themselves to publishers, critics and readers? In distinguishing their works from writing that is more commercial are they not only marketing it better for a particular discriminating urban customer? "Here, what is your pleasure, an upbeat rag telling you about all the best upscale happenings in town? Are you a

²²⁷Universal, "Condé Nast apuesta por los lectores mexicanos."

²²⁸Varela, "Condé Nast apuesta por lector mexicano con más revistas."

morbid literary type? Here is a novel. Or is real crime your thing?”

Chapter V: Fleeing National Character

In this chapter I turn to one recent novel. It is written by a writer who is considered by some to be one of the most original and incisive voices of his generation and is already making a name for himself in the exclusive club of Mexican letters. What makes his writing, and particularly this book interesting for this project is that he explicitly grapples with the canon of national character studies. As I will show, for example, he cites both Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz in the beginning of his work. Since the novel deals with an important moment in the recent history of Mexico, the Carlos Salinas de Gortari administration and the assassination of the presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, it becomes an ideal basis from which to consider the ways that writing today can be used to reflect on a contemporary situation. The result of this particular instance of literary reflection results in an image of Mexicans as those who always seem to be able to escape psychological analysis. In that sense they cannot be different from any other postnational subject.

The Mexican National Character Canon

Diagnosing national character using the tools of psychoanalysis was quite the vogue during a significant portion of the twentieth century. The sociologist Norbert Elias, for instance, argued that educating individuals how to act socially does for them what the civilizing process, over centuries, did for the societies they were born into.²²⁹ Given this rationale, a researcher was justified in applying the findings of psychoanalysis, gained through work with individuals, to the study of entire nations. This was done repeatedly in the case of Mexicans. The anthropologist Roger Bartra has compiled an anthology of these psychologically inspired investigations, spanning the whole of last century, in his tome *Anatomy of the Mexican*.

The first work in the collection is one by the positivist philosopher Ezequiel Chávez, published in 1901. In his essay, he posed the research problem in this way, “all of us know that we are different psychologically from a French man or from an Anglo-American, from a Chinese man or from a German; but we are ignorant concerning the nature of the difference...”²³⁰ In elucidating his findings, Chávez contributes to a field of investigation opened years earlier, giving it new urgency by framing it with a concern for developing and adapting official policies to fit the actual psychological character of the Mexican population. In 1901, however, Mexico was ruled by a dictator that was more intent on modernizing the country and attracting foreign capital than adapting government to the national peculiarities of Mexicans. It was not until after the Mexican Revolution, and specifically the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas, from 1934 to 1940, that the government introduced wide-ranging reforms meant to orchestrate a more organic national unity.

Unsurprising, the most elaborate and enduring formulation of Mexican character, *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, appeared in its original edition the same year that Cárdenas came to power. Samuel Ramos, the author of this study, is often considered the father of Mexican national philosophy. As the rest of his colleagues, he turned to psychology to provide a theoretical framework. Since Ramos re-edited his work, publishing several editions up until the

²²⁹Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, xiii.

²³⁰Bartra, *Anatomía del mexicano*, 27.

1950s, the decade at the end of which he died, his essay can serve as the bookends of the golden age of Mexican nationalism, coinciding with the Mexican Miracle, mid-century decades of sustained economic growth attributed to an effective policy of import-substitution.

The only other study of Mexican character that can rival Ramos' is *The Labyrinth of Solitude* by the Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, first published in 1950. Paz later returned to his essay, publishing a *Postscript* in 1970, and a *Return to The Labyrinth of Solitude* in 1979. Already in his original essay, but particularly in his latter addendums, Paz moves explicitly beyond the project of national philosophy instigated by Ramos. Interestingly, though, in pointing out the failures of national development, as I show below, he too turns to psychological arguments, both blaming the tradition of authoritarianism in Mexico and the resistance of Mexicans to analysis, for the absence of a true Mexican subject.

Particular, Typical and Universal

There is an entire subfield of literary studies that focus on nationalist novels. Of particular interest to scholars contributing to this area of investigation is fiction appearing in the nineteenth century, which in Latin America is known as the century of nation building. Benedict Anderson, for example, turns to José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *The Mangy Parrot*, a novel published in 1816 in Mexico City. For Anderson, what demonstrates that there is a "national imagination" at work in the novel is "a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside." The landscape consists of hospitals, prisons, villages, monasteries, Indians, and Blacks. "Nothing assures us," continues Anderson, "of this sociological solidity more than the succession of plurals." A prison in the novel stands in for an entire series of them. "For they conjure up a social space full of *comparable* prisons, none in itself of any unique importance, but all representative (in their simultaneous, separate existence)" of the kind of prisons that existed throughout the nation.²³¹

Crucial to the national imagination, then, according to Anderson, is the way that readers are encouraged to imagine the particular as typical. A particular prison, for example, is typical of prisons everywhere in colonial Mexico. The particular is generalized by the national imagination, but at the same time it is not universalized. A prison in Fernández de Lizardi's novel, for example, is not representative of prisons anywhere in the world. Based on Anderson's characterization of nationalist fiction, a national or postnational fiction can be defined in two ways, that in which the particular remains as idiosyncratically particular, or contrarily, that in which the particular is wholly universalized.

Servín's *Al final del vacío*, which I write about in the previous chapter, is postnational precisely for these reasons. Nowhere in his novel does Servín mention Mexico City by name. The postapocalyptic narrative could be imagined as occurring in any number of large cities. Certainly his narrative has elements that are universal. To the degree that this is true, Servín's work is not national. But even more, it is postnational also in the other sense. Even though he never names the city in which the events of his narrative take place, because of his use of language, references to certain food items, among other details, the attentive reader will notice that the city he describes can be no other than Mexico City. Moreover, the Mexico City of Servín's novel is not

231 Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflecting on the origin and spread of nationalism*, 30.

Mexico City as national capital. There is no federal government, no immigrant compatriots from other areas, there is no world external to the city whatsoever. When Servín describes a prison, for example, there is no reason to think that he is describing a prison that is representative of anything more than either a specific prison, or a prison typical to the city. Mexico City, in its idiosyncratic particularity, is in *Al final del vacío* a non-national location.

This is true also of the Mexico City of *Chilango* magazine. In the article about loft-styled apartments, for example, we are not given a sociological landscape of national plurals. Loft apartments, the article describes, originated in New York City. In this case, New York appears both as an external seemingly-universal other-place, as well as a specific highly-developed city worthy of emulation. In this article nothing is mentioned about any other Mexican city or region. As with Servín's novel, there are only highly local particulars or international urban universals. The nation as an intermediate collective entity, somewhere between individual, city, and the world, is skipped almost entirely.

Empty Time

Novels and newspapers, according to Anderson, played a fundamental role in developing the sense of "homogenous, empty time" so necessary for the birth of national imaginings. In novels from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, readers were introduced to a perspective by which they could know events occurring to someone, while "meanwhile" someone else was involved in a whole other set of events. This sense of simultaneity by which at first seemingly unrelated events and people are brought together in the imagination is produced even more dramatically in the case of newspapers, where on a series of pages we can see a multiplicity of events all occurring on the same day.²³²

Anderson writes that "Reading a newspaper is like reading a novel whose author has abandoned any thought of a coherent plot." Stories are included and juxtaposed arbitrarily, due to a "calendrical coincidence" and dictates of the market. If "Mali disappears from the pages of *The New York Times* after two days of famine reportage... readers do not for a moment imagine that Mali has disappeared.... The novelistic format of the newspaper assures them that somewhere out there the 'character' Mali moves along quietly, awaiting its next reappearance..." What is essential, to the degree that newspapers aid the imagining of the nation, is that each reader is aware that "his" ritual of reading the morning paper is being replicated by thousands "of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion." Most of these other actual and potential readers are those "he" imagines to be his compatriots.²³³

Creating empty time might have been necessary for imagining the nation, as Anderson argues, but it does not follow that empty time is necessarily national. If people in Mexico City read a periodical whose circulation is restricted primarily to the metropolitan area, *Chilango* magazine, for example, in as much as they imagine others living their own parallel lives, reading the same articles, they imagine them as fellow urban residents and not compatriots. More generally, people reading lifestyle magazines, whether distributed internationally or within a particular country or city, enter into a simultaneous imagined relationship not with other members of a nation, but

²³²Ibid., 22 ff.

²³³Ibid., 33, 35.

others who are interested and participate in the same lifestyle, whether locally or internationally. With postnational literature, empty, homogeneous time becomes a temporal space either populated by unassociated individuals, or those who belong to any number of affinity groups, none of which are nationally defined.

Moreover, it must be stated, literature in Mexico City today often does not even recreate empty time at all. Simultaneity depends in print to a large extent on the use of the third person. To imagine two people who simultaneously go about their lives unbeknownst to each other, one needs to be able to assume a perspective that neither belongs to one person or the other. The use of the first person tends to eliminate the view from elsewhere necessary for imagining simultaneity. There is at least one renowned writer in Mexico, Luis Zapata, who uses the first person exclusively. His fiction reads as if they were transcripts from voice recordings. Servín's novel too, *Al final del vacío*, is written entirely in the first person.

In a novel belonging to the same genre as the one that I will turn to in this chapter, Elmer Mendoza's *Un asesino solitario* is emblematic of the postnational literature appearing in Mexico today. In his narrative Mendoza does not create a "world of plurals". His description of places and institutions are not representative. Furthermore, the novel is narrated in the first person from beginning to end. In the opening paragraph we are interpolated, not as a community of compatriot readers, but as individuals. "You know what brother?" the narrator asks the reader directly. "I have been watching, watching you, and I feel that you are a cool dude, easygoing, one of my kind, I don't know how to explain it, it is like a vibe I feel brother, a good vibe that tells me you aren't a kid and that I can trust you, isn't that right?"²³⁴ It is because the narrator feels this vibe, because a virtual relationship between the narrator and the reader is established, one that does not hinge on belonging to any particular group, that the narrator proceeds to tell the reader his thrilling if incriminating story about when he was hired to assassinate a presidential candidate.

Unifying Sentiments

The problem for nationalists has always been how to foment a sentiment that can unite individuals and groups which under other circumstances may not have much reason to identify with each other. In Latin America, as in other developing areas of the world, there are significant barriers to overcome, not least of which are discrepancies in wealth, education, and access to institutions and services. Doris Sommer, in her study *Foundational Fictions*, argues that in assigning students Latin American romances, nationalist education officials were attempting to instill a passionate sentiment for the nation. In these nineteenth and early twentieth century works of fiction, erotic union between individuals served as an allegory for a political union overcoming class, race, party affiliation, etc. The desire for romantic union was in these texts an expression of the desire for national unity.²³⁵

The problem with Sommer's argument is that she is at pains to explain why these romances should have tragic endings. As Nancy Vogeley points out in her review of Sommer's study, "a happy ending for lovers of different races may have been a fictional strategy preferred by

²³⁴Mendoza, *Un asesino solitario*, 11.

²³⁵Sommer, *Foundational Fictions*.

government officials because it could help to make attractive the elimination of a separate Indian race and culture in a given nation.” Vogeley suggests that perhaps instead it was the empathetic suffering that these romances provoked in readers that made them attractive to officials who assigned them to students. “The tears which a reader sheds for the thwarted love of María and Efraín in,” *María* by Jorge Isaacs, for example, “must be read as a lesson in the sensitivity that Columbians were being asked to learn during the 1860s as a response to the plantation slavery around them.”²³⁶ Literature was assigned to students by nationalist officials in order to encourage men to feel for one another.

Robert McKee Irwin in his book *Mexican Masculinities* gives a more nuanced take. In the nineteenth century literature of Mexico, he finds that heterosexual romance does not have the importance that Sommer identifies. For him, it is the homosocial bond between males that serves as the nucleus from which the national male community is extrapolated. In this literature there are many frank and naive expressions of affection and desire between males, which often, as in Sommer’s romances, end in frustration. The questioning of gender in the early twentieth century in Mexico, and finally the reaction against gender ambiguity that parallels the instituting of a paternalistic national state in the 1930s and 40s, solidifies the *macho* homophobic male as the heroic figure of Mexican nationalism.²³⁷ There are a few evolutionary steps, however, between this figure and those that appear in the novels that I am citing. Servín’s protagonist, even with his sexism and homophobia, is far from a symbol of the paternalist state. Moreover, it is the same for the character Aburto, alleged assassin of a presidential candidate, that I will be analyzing in this chapter.

Instead of reading literature in Mexico from the perspective of the nation building project, it makes more sense, at least now, to appreciate the way that it calls into question the nation. A narration of the adventures of a male protagonist traveling through an urban landscape, a model that Anderson proposes for nationalist literature, will never be completely explained in terms of a function in aiding a burgeoning national sentiment.²³⁸ Take Henry Miller for example, in his romps through New York. Nobody reads him as fueling a national sentiment in the United States, nor reads his amorous adventures as allegories for the nation. Novelists in the United States and Europe, have for long been at liberty to indulge in their art without feeling the weight of having to contribute to the construction of a country’s literary tradition in a way that pushes forward the national development project.

Henry Miller’s trilogy *The Rosy Crucifixion* is a good model for postnational literature. In his musings on people in New York, he is not adverse to formulating conjectures on character, both national and psychological. However, just as soon as he appears to construct a mini-theory, most of the time he proceeds to quickly disassemble it. He does the same with psychoanalysis. After explaining some the science’s power, he gives the following description of a type of ego that can never be pinned down by it.

These are the fluid, solvent egos who lie still as a fetus in the uterine marshes of their stagnant self. When you puncture the sac, when you think Ah! I’ve got you at last! you find nothing but clots of mucus in your hand. These are the baffling ones,

²³⁶Vogeley, “Review: Foundational Fictions: The national romances of Latin America,” 392-3.

²³⁷Irwin, *Mexican Masculinities*.

²³⁸Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflecting on the origin and spread of nationalism*, 30.

in my opinion. They are like the ‘soluble fish’ of Surrealist metempsychology. They grow without a backbone; they dissolve at will. All you can ever lay hold of are the indissoluble, indestructible nuclei—the disease germs, so to say. About such individuals one feels that in body, mind and soul they are nothing but disease...”²³⁹

What makes Miller’s musing relevant here is that in describing the “variety of defense works with which the human being hedges himself,” he parallels the findings of scholars who set out to discover the national character in Mexico at about the same time.

It does not really say much to argue, as I have been, that contemporary literature does not fit the nationalist mold. It may be countered, for example, that nationalist literature not being written says little about the current state of nationalism itself, as among the population at large. This, however, is not the research problem for this project. What is at its heart is my argument that writers are switching out their national vocation for something else. In order to demonstrate that, in this chapter, I am taking up a novel that explicitly engages with the tradition of Mexican national character studies of the twentieth century.

A City of Assassins

In a conversation that we had, Heriberto Yépez (b.1974) criticized writers of his generation who no longer read Mexican writers in general, and especially not those of previous generations. I had pushed him on the subject, sharing with him the fact that many of the writers that I worked with primarily talked with him about, and made references to, authors from the United States and Europe. The literary spirits haunting Mexico City, it seemed to me, were anything but the greats of the Mexican canon. This, however, is not true for Yépez. He takes the Mexican tradition seriously, and he feels, as he told me, that other Mexican writers should also. This conversation took place while we made our way with a group of others from the hip Condesa neighborhood, across Insurgentes Avenue, to the grittier south Roma neighborhood and a dive, The Bull Pen, where writers and artists often like to go slumming, particularly during the early hours of the morning.

On the back cover of Heriberto Yépez novel *A.B.U.R.T.O.*, one reads that he based his book on the actual confessions of the man who was sentenced for the assassination of the Mexican presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in 1994, as well as rumors and newspaper clippings. His is a “saga of a postnational world.”²⁴⁰ The novel is an investigation into a political assassination that concludes by giving causal weight to the malignant spirit, not of individuals or even nations, but rather to post-industrial urban situations that cannot but result in droves of potential assassins.

In the first chapter we follow the protagonist from his provincial town to Mexico City. It is eight year-old Mario gazing out of the window of the bus that he and his sleeping mother are traveling in which provides Yépez the occasion to give his readers the following description of the Metropolis.²⁴¹

²³⁹Miller, *Sexus*, 422.

²⁴⁰See the back cover of Yépez, *A.B.U.R.T.O.*

²⁴¹Mario Aburto Martínez, is the full name of the man sentenced for the assassination of the presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in 1994.

Mexico City has always glutted its visitors and witnesses. The City, together with Tokyo, has vied for being the largest of the globe. More than a city, for ages it has been a perverse syndrome. Mexico City has been a virus that replicates every time someone is born in the infected region. Mexico City intends to spread throughout the national territory, to convert the whole of its population into *chilangos*. It is not only an urban area; it is a plague. And as with every plague, it is nomad. Mexico City will reach everywhere. In any moment now, Los Angeles itself will become one of its boroughs....²⁴²

Little Mario, Yépez writes, comes to live in Mexico City not very many years before the terrible earthquake of 1985 would tumble “a good portion of its buildings, leaving them like teeth about to fall out, leaving the metropolis torn in two, bursting at its deepest foundations, disemboweled. It was a city that would continue growing, that is for sure, but only in the way ashen fingernails and hair continue to grow on a corpse.”²⁴³ Other cities would sprout up out of the ruins, cities that would be much worse than the Mexico City that had been destroyed by the earthquake.

In an introductory section before his first chapter, Yépez introduces us to Mario as an adult, after his arrest for the assassination of the presidential candidate Colosio. Mario by then had grown into one of those crude and unrefined characters common to Mexican literature. “He looked like,” Yépez writes, “one of those neurotic ‘*pelados*’, ready for insane violence, like the ones that Samuel Ramos talked about...”²⁴⁴ Like Ramos, who draws on the psychology of Alfred Adler, Yépez turns to the early childhood of not only Mario, but also to that of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (b.1948) in order to discover clues as to the roots of the violence in which they were both implicated.²⁴⁵

In the first chapter Mario’s mother invites her two sons to go with her to Mexico City. She is escaping her abusive partner to move in with a lover. For Mario, to go with his mother and leave his father would be treason. What Freud did not fully understand in appropriating the Oedipus myth, according to Yépez, is that in Mexico a son will ally himself with his father in order to “kill the woman that banished him after less than a year of parasitizing her from within.”²⁴⁶ All he wanted was to continue in his mother’s womb, or at least to leave it on his own terms. But since his mother expelled him into the severe solitude of the world, she can only be a whore to him. Mario and his brother hated their mother intensely, even more than they did their overbearing father. That is why they did not hold it against their father when he would abandon them for long periods without food or money. Mario’s brother stayed behind. But whether out of a lingering desire for further opportunities of parasitism, simple curiosity, or out of a perverse desire for his mother as emblem of all the women he would attempt to dominate, Mario decided

²⁴²Ibid., 19-20.

²⁴³Ibid., 20.

²⁴⁴Ibid., 11.

²⁴⁵ The most persistent rumors have it that even though Mario Aburto Martínez has stated that he acted alone, the assassination was done under the orders of then president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Six months after the assassination of Colosio, Salina’s ex-brother-in-law José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, and leading Party figure, was also assassinated. Carlos Salinas’s brother, Raúl Salinas, was convicted for the death of Ruiz Massieu in 1995 and then later acquitted in 2005. FRONTLINE, for one, suggested that both assassinations could be linked to large sums of money given as pay-offs to leading politicians from drug traffickers, see FRONTLINE, “Murder, Money, and Mexico: The fall of the Salinas brothers.”

²⁴⁶Yépez, *A.B.U.R.T.O.*, 17.

to betray his father, delay his personal development as much as it hinged on gaining independence from his mother, and accompany her to the metropolis.²⁴⁷

Inferiority Complex of Mexicans

“In order to understand the mechanism of the Mexican mind,” wrote Ramos in 1934, “we will examine it in a social type in which all of its movements are found intensified... The best specimen for study is the Mexican ‘*pelado*’, because it is in him that we find the outline, the most elemental expression of the national character.”²⁴⁸ The *pelado* is bellicose, as are Mexicans in general according to Ramos, not because he is hostile to humanity, but because he needs to compensate for a sense of worthlessness. “Every exterior circumstance that can highlight the low value with which he regards himself will provoke a violent reaction...”²⁴⁹ The end is violence, but the beginning of the causal series is an “inferiority complex that is experienced as lack of confidence in oneself...”²⁵⁰ It is this lack of self-confidence that pushes Mexican men to clutch at their aggressive masculinity as a drowning man would a wooden plank floating by, and to externalize the distrust that he has of himself into a universal distrust of everyone else as potential enemy.

The distrustful man is always afraid of everything, always vigilant, quick to defend himself. He is suspicious of any gesture, any movement, any word. He interprets everything as an offense. In this respect a Mexican goes to unbelievable extremes. His perception is frankly abnormal. Because of his hypersensitivity the Mexican quarrels incessantly. He does not wait until he is attacked but rather hastens to offend. Quite often these pathological reactions push him far, even to the point of committing unnecessary crimes.

Writing seventy years later, Yépez deviates from Ramos’ thesis only in his emphasis on cities. Ramos himself recognized the inferiority complex that he described as arising in part from the living conditions of the urban proletariat, from the conditions of those hopelessly caught between rural ‘backwardness’ and the inaccessible refinements of urban modernity.²⁵¹ The quote above was in fact taken from a section of his essay entitled: The Mexican of the City. But in insisting that the traits of character common to the uncouth *pelado*, or other urban inhabitants, are but those of all Mexicans, Ramos is not only guilty of a conceit common to residents of the capital, but he is actively participating in constructing post-Revolutionary Mexico as a nation, that is a spiritual or psychological community to which Mexicans can imagine they belong.

²⁴⁷Ibid., 17-9.

²⁴⁸Ramos, *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México*, 53.

²⁴⁹Ibid., 54.

²⁵⁰Ibid., 60.

²⁵¹ Roger Bartra describes the Mexican national project in this way, “What is odd about the Mexican situation [as compared to that of the English] is that there is a curious departure from the proletarian prototype, with the object of fomenting the development of a national identity. After the Revolution, the Mexican nationalists [among which figured Samuel Ramos], orphans of native bourgeois traditions, had only the peasants and the proletariat as sources of inspiration. An ideological dissection had to be performed in order to extract some features of popular culture for elevation to the category of national ideology...” Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and metamorphosis in the Mexican character*, 124.

National Belonging

The level of national integration, the degree to which Mexicans considered themselves first and foremost as members of the Mexican nation, began to increase dramatically during the period that Ramos wrote his essay.²⁵² The redistributive and social policies of the Lázaro Cárdenas administration (1934-40), the consolidation of a clientelist one-party state, the creation of a revolutionary myth of Mexican national unity, the drastic expansion of public education through which not only the national myth but standard forms of Spanish and respect for national symbols and institution were disseminated, the muralist movement and other nationalist art including state promoted and monitored cinema and literature, increased newspaper circulation, all contributed to the diffusion of an official national sentiment.

This sentiment climaxed in the 1950s, during a period that Salvador Novo's enthusiastic editorials and chronicles were widely read. Mexicans during this period spoke glowingly about the Mexican Miracle of economic and cultural development. Unparalleled demographic growth, urbanization, dramatic increases in literacy rates, increasing exports, as well as the international popularity of Mexican painting, literature, movies, and music, were all motives for national optimism. The sentiment, however, began to decline in the 1960s, particularly after the student massacre of Tlatelolco on the 2nd of October 1968. As Deborah Cohn points out, "That day became a turning point in the Mexican psyche... For many people, the massacre signaled the end of belief in the State's ability to resolve the nation's problems, and in the legitimacy of the regime in general."²⁵³

The populist policies of Luis Echeverría (1970-6) along with the boom in oil production during the subsequent José López Portillo administration (1976-82) attenuated the decline for a time, and then there was a brief period of optimism with president Salinas de Gortari beginning in 1988, when many Mexicans were lead to believe that they were finally becoming part of the first world, but the economic and political crisis of 1976, 1982, 1987, and the one beginning in December 1994, the failure of developmentalism to satisfy popular expectations, the increasing presence of (and national and international solidarity with) sometimes insubordinate social movements particularly after the earthquake in 1985, the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Zapatista rebellion beginning in January of 1994, the assassination of the presidential candidate Colosio and another party leader later in that same year, the renewed interest in Mexico for attracting foreign investments, a series of technocratic administrations, the fracturing of the official party, the persistent attractiveness of the United States as alternative country of work and residence, along with the demographic and economic emergence of other urban industrial centers, Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Tijuana, eroded the national structure centered in Mexico City.²⁵⁴

If territory-wide national allegiances ever were the most prominent in the lives of Mexican

252 For one account of integrationist policies, particularly those targeting indigenous populations, and the role that anthropologists and other intellectuals played in them, see Doremus, "Indigenism, Mestizaje, and National Identity in Mexico during the 1940s and the 1950s."

253 Cohn, "The Mexican Intelligentsia, 1950-1968: Cosmopolitanism, National Identity, and the State," 179-80.

254 A survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center found that 4 out of 10 Mexicans would leave Mexico to live in the United States, 1 out of 3 if they were college graduates. "Such numbers reveal a people so fed up with Mexico's dysfunctional politics and stagnant economy that their nationalism is wilting," commented the Christian Science Monitor, "Is Mexico still a nation?."

citizens, today it is regional and local formulations of rootedness that inspire the most pride. A popular singer can boast to his Mexico City fans in the Palace of Fine Arts that he is from Jalisco, the “most Mexican state of this Country.”²⁵⁵ Residents of the peninsula of Yucatán continue to celebrate that during the nineteenth century they defeated federal troops and formed their own independent state. Indigenous communities across the country claim for themselves political and territorial autonomy from the federal government and conduct their affairs according to traditional custom. And inhabitants of each major city and state, *regios*, *jarochos*, *tapatíos*, *yucas*, *cachanillos*, all have their own peculiar pride and reasons for detesting the Capital.

Narcorealism

Transnational markets are not simply homogenizing populations across the globe, adapting them to the dictates of mass production as it was believed back in the sixties, writes the anthropologist Roger Bartra (2002b). Contrarily enough, many of the processes that are grouped under the banner of globalization are strengthening local power and the recuperation of “provincial traditions imbued by religious custom and ethnic fanaticism...” Increasingly, what he has analyzed as the Fourth Power, that is the institutions of cultural production including the media and public and private education, is exercising its autonomy not in propagating norms of global cohabitation but rather “a strange mixture of old conservative values with the vulgar zeal of the nouveau riche.” One extreme example in Mexico is that of the cultural compendium comprising the lifestyle identified with drug traffickers, “a combination of parochial Catholicism with a cruel and unbridled appetite for wealth, cowboy pretentiousness married to transnational capital.”²⁵⁶

It is this world lubricated by illicit commerce that Yépez taps into with his novel about the man who presumably assassinated Colosio. Like the narco-novelist Élmer Mendoza (b. 1949), he puts on display a world in which greed, drugs, sex, money, hired assassins, political intrigue, and transnational markets violently collide. This is not a fictional or unknown world. In part because of the events surrounding the actual assassination of Colosio in March 1994, and president Salinas de Gortari’s ex-brother-in-law six months later, Mexicans are quite aware as to the extent that drug money, and the desire for wealth and power, corrupt. Yépez calls the genre narcorealism. His novel, as those of Mendoza and others, are written not so much to produce a possible world as to reveal the world, corrupt as it is, through the devices of fiction.

Escaping Diagnosis

In his novel, Yépez invokes the *pelado*, the most national of Mexican characters. In citing Ramos in the introductory section and Octavio Paz in the first chapter, Yépez situates his novel in the tradition for which these authors are its two most durable voices, the tradition of Mexican national character studies. But in emphasizing cities, and in citing Wilhelm Reich’s analysis of character, Yépez deviates from the national line drawn by his cynosure. It could be argued that both Ramos and Paz wished to exercise the inferiority complex and solitude that they identified as constitutive of the Mexican type through an intellectual understanding of these peculiar

255 The singer was Alejandro Fernández, and the event was Celebremos México 2005, see Villarreal, *El periodismo cultural en tiempos de la globalifobia*, 83..

256 Bartra, “Prólogo,” 19.

national neuroses. Their works were intended to be therapeutic as much as diagnostic. This is not the case with Yépez.

Reich's ideas about character appear in Yépez's book only as a way of following a mutation in the *pelado*, to help the *pelado*, as it were, to become better as a *pelado*, more slippery, more of a trickster. "All character is a defense system," according to Reich.²⁵⁷ It is armor. The point is to shed it, or at least make it pliable. In the novel Mario is visited by the narrator in prison. Yépez was privy to transcripts of some visits made to the prisoner Mario Aburto Martínez, but did he also himself visit him? The narrator and Mario discuss Reich. The narrator explains to Mario, "Look, according to Reich, how can I explain it? According to him, one needs to have more flexibility. Character is a stance that is contrary to flow. I don't know if you got to that part of the book, but Reich talks about a *fluctuating character*."²⁵⁸ Mario understands:

I had already thought about that. Be like water. Don't be solid but gaseous or liquid....

... before I even found out that character existed, there was already something that told me: hey, don't always be the same, change the story for them, every time you tell them what you did, and you tell your life story, change it, little by little or a lot by a lot, but change it, don't always be the same. Don't let them say: we already know who Mario is, we already know how this little character is, we know his whole story, now we are not going to lose sight of him, we figured him out, now he is finally under our control...²⁵⁹

In that way Mario had devised a method by which to escape diagnosis and therapy. He is like the solvent ego described by Henry Miller. He is also like the patient that came to see Reich who could "produce unconscious material uninterruptedly and was able, for instance, to present the finest details of the simple and double Oedipus complex." When Reich asked him whether he really believed what he was saying and what he had learned from his analysts he said, "not in the least... with all this I cannot help smiling inside."²⁶⁰ If Yépez is right, Mario too smiles, right there where he is today in his prison cell.

Dissociative Identity and Persisting Authoritarianism

Paz also identified this propensity for self transformation in the Mexican type. A wearing and changing of masks as he referred to it.²⁶¹ But he saw it as a symptom of neurosis, or at least lamented it to the degree that it got in the way of Mexicans becoming stable rational subjects. In revisiting his diagnostic 1950 essay twenty years later, he tells us that the problem with Mexico is that it continues to be sharply divided. There is a Mexico that is developed and a Mexico that is underdeveloped, marginal. Each Mexican, as it were, carries both parts within "himself". That "other Mexico," underdeveloped and unknown, "is not outside but rather inside of us: we could

257Yépez, *A.B.U.R.T.O.*, 150.

258Ibid., 152.

259Ibid., 152-3.

260 This story is taken from *Character Analysis* by Reich; I cite it as it appears in Shapiro, "Theoretical Reflections on Wilhelm Reich's Character Analysis," 339-40.

261 In one place Paz writes of "psychological oscillations" inherent to Mexicans and the masks that they must wear Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*, 78..

not excise it without mutilating ourselves. It is a Mexico that, if we know how to recognize and name it, one day we will be transfigured..." Through proper analysis, that other Mexico "would cease to be that phantom that slips around, converting reality into a nightmare bathed in blood."²⁶²

As Ramos before him, in the spirit of applying psychoanalysis to nations, Paz goes back to the prehispanic childhood of Mexico, asserting that developmentalism has not been able to overcome the division in Mexico because of the continued legacy of Aztec ruthlessness.²⁶³ The Spanish did not so much conquer as continue the Aztec project of subjugation. "Spanish power substitutes Aztec power and in that way continues with it. In turn, independent Mexico, explicitly and implicitly continues the Aztec-Castilian tradition, centralist and authoritarian."²⁶⁴ It is a fact of significance in Paz's analysis that the Spanish chose to name their capital after the Aztec city they destroyed and built over, and that the name of this City became the name for the whole of the independent state, a name that was never dissociated from conquest and despotism.

There is an unbroken cord that runs, for Paz, from the Aztec rulers down to the colonial viceroys and the Mexican presidents, concluding with those of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), all reigning from Mexico City.²⁶⁵ After explaining the cosmological importance that the pyramid had for pre-columbian Mesoamericans, Paz writes that if the country was imagined as a truncated pyramid with a platform at its apex, like the pyramids that one can still visit north of Mexico City in Teotihuacán, then the Valley of Mexico is that superior platform and Mexico City is located at its very center. Underdeveloped provincial Mexico continues to lurk in mystery and misery, consistently repressed over centuries by the weight of authoritarian centralizing regimes.²⁶⁶ National development cannot be successful without first effecting an anti-authoritarian, decentralizing, democratic reform.

262 The blood that Paz refers to is that of hundreds of students who were massacred in Mexico City by government forces in 1968, as well as all the blood shed by conquerors and repressive rulers that came before, Ibid., 291..

263 Enrico Mario Santi describes the psychological approach that Paz utilizes and his indebtedness to Ramos in the following way: "Mexican history is like the biography of a clinical subject. Historical conflicts can be resolved, or at least understood, by employing and applying proper analytic tools.... By thus opening with a psychoanalytic framework, the book also alludes polemically to Samuel Ramos's *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* (1934), which at the time of the first edition was the most recent precursor in the use of a psychoanalytic model for the similar goal of understanding the Mexican" Santi, "Ten Keys to The Labyrinth of Solitude," 21.

264 Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*, 317.

265 The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was the official party in Mexico for over seventy years until they lost the presidential elections in 2000.

266 Rama describes the imperial hierarchy that existed during the colonial period in this way: "At the highest level were the viceregal capitals—Lima, Mexico City, and Rio de Janeiro chief among them; at the next level, the port cities visited regularly by the fleets that provided communication with Europe; then the cities where the high courts called *Audiencias* were located. Finally, all of the other towns and villages of the empire followed in descending order, forming a sort of pyramid. Each city was subordinated to the higher-ranking urban centers that lay nearby, and each extracted wealth from, and provided norms of social behavior for, the rank below. Everyone knew that Madrid, Lisbon, and Seville were located above the apex of this structure, but practically no one ruminated that, at least in economic terms, other European cities like Genoa or Amsterdam might stand higher still," Rama, *The lettered city*, 14. Today the pyramids in which Mexico City is included have been multiplied. Although anyone can tell you that the apices of cultural and economic power are located in Europe, The United States, Japan, and China, the apices of these pyramids are even less apparent and accessible than were those of the colonial period.

Integrative Violence

Like the *pelado* for Ramos, the gangster of Mexican origin in Los Angeles, the *pachuco* of the 1930s and 40s is the type that best expresses the character of the Mexican for Paz. If for Ramos the Mexican was provoked to violence out of a sense of inferiority, for Paz “he” is impelled to violence out of solitude. For the Mexican immigrants that Paz begins his essay with, even clothing becomes a point of conflict—imagine here the outlandish high-waisted pegged balloon pants and oversized coats with wide lapels and padded shoulders of the zoot suit. This extravagant form of dress not only sets the individual apart, spotlighting his isolation, his rejection of those who reject him, but in appropriating and exaggerating specific elements of fashion “pays homage to the society he is attempting to deny.”²⁶⁷ Zoot suiters themselves became targets of violence when servicemen stationed in Los Angeles, in collusion with the police and with the support of the press, went on rampages beating mostly the Latinos, but also some Blacks and Filipinos, who wore them in the early summer of 1943.

For Paz, violence is a strategy by which a Mexican man both protests his solitude, his exclusion from community, at the same time that it is also a strategy to insert himself into a social group from which violence will always set him apart. “The *pachuco*’s rebelliousness and violence is a way—irrational, self-destructive and yet eloquent—to express a desire to reintegrate... into the society that rejects him...,” and here Enrico Mario Santí quotes Paz himself: “The circle that began with provocation has completed itself and he is ready now for redemption, for his entrance into the society that rejects him.”²⁶⁸ For Paz, this society is Western, democratic, and cosmopolitan. *Pachucos* are only extreme cases; all Mexicans “are contradictory beings and cultural orphans, lonely individuals looking for social integration.”²⁶⁹ And it is electoral democracy, imagined Paz, that holds the greatest promise for reconciling Mexicans to themselves, bridging the gap between developed and underdeveloped Mexico, integrating Mexico into the universal family of industrialized and modern nations.

Toward Cosmopolitanism

Paz separates himself from Ramos by moving beyond narrow nationalism. “In contrast to Ramos’ ideas, I not only reject the possibility... of a ‘Mexican philosophy’ but expressly affirm that the history of Mexico—that is, our life as we live it concretely—empties into Universal History.”²⁷⁰ Although Paz begins with a specific marginal and violent character from the streets of Los Angeles, uses him to characterize Mexicans in general, he is intent at arriving at the universality of the Mexican condition, how Mexicans participate in modernity. As Jorge Capetillo-Ponce puts it, Paz’s essay “*The Labyrinth* is also a reflection on the destiny of humankind, because the situation of modern Mexicans can be applied to any marginalized, isolated human living in any part of the world today. The direction of Paz’s analysis in *The Labyrinth* shows a transition from the examination of a particular and extreme example of

267Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*, 16.

268Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*, 17; Santí, “Ten Keys to The Labyrinth of Solitude,” 20.

269Capetillo-Ponce, “Deciphering The Labyrinth: The influence of Georg Simmel on the sociology of Octavio Paz,” 96.

270Cohn, “The Mexican Intelligentsia, 1950-1968: Cosmopolitanism, National Identity, and the State,” 152.

Mexicanness in the first chapter, to an assessment of the situation of modern humankind in the last chapter and the appendix.”²⁷¹

“While solitude was, on the one hand, alienating,” describes Cohn about Paz’s essay, “it was nevertheless a bridge that joined Mexicans to everyone else in the postwar ‘nightmare of history,’ in which the playing field between the West (as metropolis, center, ‘civilization’) and the many marginalized—frequently, former colonial—nations was now seen as having been leveled.”²⁷² While Paz was much too optimistic concerning the leveling that had occurred between modern states—discrepancies of power were only exacerbated during the length of the twentieth century—he was correct as to the modern human condition.²⁷³ While “we are for the first time in our history, contemporary with all men,” it is only to the degree that “We all have been converted into peripheral beings, even Europeans and North Americans have. We are all at the margin because there is no longer a center.”²⁷⁴ Those who would overly insist on the national idiosyncrasies of Mexicans obstruct what can be gained by Mexicans assuming their place among citizens of the world in a spirit of cosmopolitanism and democracy.

Flexible Identity

It is here that we can see Yépez tapping into Paz’s insights, if only to demonstrate that fifty years has not changed much, that Paz’s optimism was unwarranted, that Mexicans continue to be like others in the world only in that they continue to find themselves isolated, solitary, and peripheral. No worldwide community has appeared to shelter the inhabitants of the globe. Not even the president of Mexico escapes. He too, we find, is hypersensitive, distrustful, and violent. “Little Carlos,” the former president when he was young, “had been a tormented adolescent, violent. He felt rejected by his family. He felt that everyone and everything, including the furniture, accused him of something.” Mario and Carlos both suffer from rejection and both of them act on it by directing violence outward. But contrarily to what Ramos thought, a sense of worthlessness and attempts at compensating for it do not themselves define the borders of a national community. Today people the world over find themselves alienated and resentful, but not for that reason are more solidary with each other.

“Carlos changed his personality constantly. He could not stop being three or four different people at the same time.” Like Mario, the young president-to-be slipped easily in and out of character as circumstances required. It is an archaic moral code that requires one to struggle to be the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, to always adhere to a predetermined series of principles, to always be faithful to friends, family, and country. At least with respect to assassinations and politics, drug trafficking and perhaps business more generally, it is more effective to be flexible. Circumstances change. There is a time and a place for everything, every posture. Keep people guessing as to your next move. Why stick with one tactic if another is better. Surprise is an important strategy of war. Don’t be overly sentimental about your affective engagements. Be

271Capetillo-Ponce, “Deciphering The Labyrinth: The influence of Georg Simmel on the sociology of Octavio Paz,” 96.

272Cohn, “The Mexican Intelligentsia, 1950-1968: Cosmopolitanism, National Identity, and the State,” 151.

273 Just to mention the most obvious, the bipolar geopolitical situation during the cold war has now effectively been reduced to a unipolar one shaken only by terrorism and rogue states.

274Cohn, “The Mexican Intelligentsia, 1950-1968: Cosmopolitanism, National Identity, and the State,” 151; Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*, 317.

ready to betray and abandon them when necessary.²⁷⁵ Don't wallow helplessly in your wounded pride. Harbor it; focus it; act on it. You are strong if only you could really believe that you are.

Mario and Carlos are two individuals with what Bartra has called a liquid identity. Like immigrants and other transnationals, conditions make it imperative for them to be resourceful and adaptable. But unlike the latter, Mario and Carlos are strangers that emerge from within states themselves. They form part of the "masses of 'normal' citizens" that begin to "assume, ever more, the liquid condition of those 'others'."²⁷⁶ Today, for many people, everybody is a little stranger. The altruistic spirit of service to one's compatriots, the feeling of belonging to a large community of fraternal conationals, in recent times has never been as challenged.

Carlos became president of his country, if we are to believe Yépez, because he is one of the most resentful of his compatriots and was in the best position to prove to the world that he is someone. It is not a sense of worthlessness and weakness that separates Carlos from Mario—Yépez is certain that Ramos was right at least about that—but birth, resources, the people they know, the networks they are involved in. Both of them have an inferiority complex and feel alone in the world. They desperately struggle to shrug off the consciousness of losers that clings to them. Carlos and Mario struggle to be strong, to be what they consider to be real men. Carlos has the advantage that he has many friends in high places that help and validate him, facilitate his ascension to power.²⁷⁷ They both desire to conquer, and succeed in killing, perhaps not even as much as they fantasize about it.²⁷⁸ If Mario does not become president, does not rob a country of millions of dollars by privatizing public companies, selling them below their real value to his cronies, or enters into lucrative alliance with drug traffickers, it is not because he would have some moral qualms about it; it is because like many Mexicans his circumstances limit him. Like Carlos, he does what he can to survive and to prove the world that he is worth something.

Violence for Gain

In commenting on the Mexican *pachuco* gangsters in Los Angeles, Paz interpreted violence as even an "eloquent" expression of a desire of Mexicans to belong to society. In a true democracy, in a country where democratic development has overcome the division between those who have and those who do not, Paz believed, there would be no reason for violence. Today, however, as far as the electoral process goes, Mexico has never been as democratic as it is now. And even though discrepancies in wealth have been exacerbated over the years, the most severe violence in Mexico is not motivated by misery.

275 There is a story by Norma Lazo that captures this fluidity. It is built around the axiom "never turn your back on your friends." In the last scene the narrator turns her back on a man that had been her friend since childhood as he lies dying on the ground. It could be argued that the protagonist does not in fact ever violate the axiom. This certainly is her perspective on the matter. What changes, with changing circumstances, are her allegiances.

276 Bartra, "Culturas líquidas en la tierra baldía," 72.

277 I reference how friendship is translated into political capital in Mexico below.

278 Carlos Salinas de Gortari, as a three year old child reportedly participated with his five year old brother Raúl Salinas in the execution-styled shooting death of a twelve year old domestic worker in his family's home. The killing was deemed an accident. In Yépez's account Carlos Salinas continued to kill cats, apparently a pastime for some Mexican boys, until the age of fourteen. And as already mentioned, Carlos Salinas has been implicated, and Mario Aburto Martínez sentenced, for the 1994 assassination of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio.

The cover story of the December 2008 issue of *Forbes* magazine reads “Mexican Meltdown”. In it, the authors comment on both the current war on drug trafficking and the economic recession in Mexico. They ask, “Is Mexico descending into criminal and economic chaos?” Over 4,300 people have been killed in drug trade related violence that year, up from 2,500 the year before.²⁷⁹ The increasing violence has been provoked in part by president Felipe Calderón’s anti-drug campaign. Besides the escalating violence, the most patent result of the campaign is the way it has made visible the degree to which the government itself is corrupted. The federal police chief was assassinated in May 2008. *The New York Times* reported it as an inside job, done by police officers for a drug cartel working out of the state of Sinaloa. The result of Calderón’s efforts “has been mayhem: a street war in which no target has been too big, no attack too brazen for the gangs.” The violence, it seems, is none other than caused by the struggle over control of a market. Corrupt officials fight over their share of profits, and traffickers themselves over control of sources, routes, and markets.²⁸⁰ Drugs, apparently, are still lucrative even at a time when Mexico is suffering from decreased demand in the United States for other Mexican manufactured and transported goods.

The last scene of Yépez’s novel is of the assassination of the presidential candidate Colosio in Tijuana in 1994. Yépez uses the confusion surrounding the actual event to create a doubling and multiplication, that goes quickly from the particular, skipping the national, to the universal. Mario Aburto Martínez, “we must remember, suffers from a limit personality disorder, is borderline, has low levels of tolerance, little control over his impulses, unstable, voluble and a tendency to take revenge immediately, anxiety, paranoia, high aggressivity. As an analyst, I am authorized to describe him in those terms: Aburto is a man machined by a dysfunctional society.”²⁸¹ At the moment that he fires at the candidate, Yépez has the assassin split into two mirror images, one Mario, the other Aburto. Neither of them knows who shot the candidate in the head, and who shot him in the stomach.

The newspaper *El Universal* reported that there were at least three different suspects that the government called Mario Aburto. Rumors spread, that the suspect arrested was not the one that showed up in Mexico City to be tried; he was switched for another. The accused man whose files Yépez had access to, he writes, is a man who uses glasses, and every month requests *Muy Interesante*, a magazine offering features about technology, nature, and history, and the Spanish language version of *Reader’s Digest*, along with “hundreds of books from the library, the majority of them about psychiatry, literature and chess.” He is unsure, claims Yépez, about his own guilt. Some days he runs through the events of that fateful day over in his head and he is sure that he did not kill the presidential candidate. However, should he confess to that? Would it make any difference? At any rate, a man who does not hit his mark, is not much of a man, is he?

²⁸²

Finally the narrator speaks for himself.²⁸³ As it turns out, he too was at the rally, he too carried a gun, and as perhaps many others he also thought about assassinating the presidential candidate. However, before the candidate was shot, he threw his gun onto the ground in disgust, what was

²⁷⁹Bogan et al., “The Next Disaster.”

²⁸⁰McKinley, “Killings of Police Threaten Mexico’s War on Drugs.”

²⁸¹Yépez, *A.B.U.R.T.O.*, 217.

²⁸²*Ibid.*, 220.

²⁸³*Ibid.*, 223.

he thinking? Then it happened, “a head burst and blood and brains flew everywhere. It made me laugh. I felt pity for them and for the idiot candidate.” Everyone ran. “A good part of the crowd that fled imagined that they had been the assassins. They lived the big moment of their lives.” He picked up his gun and ran with them. There he was, “I was part of the flight.”²⁸⁴

In dividing Mario Aburto into two personalities, based on a newspaper report that there were in fact several suspect to which the government attributed the same name, in placing himself at the scene of the crime, and in running with everyone that fled after the assassination, Yépez, through the narrating voice of his novel, demonstrates how guilt comes to be attributed to many people. It is like the opening line of Servín’s novel, “we all carry a crime.”²⁸⁵ However, guilt is anything but national. It weighs on individuals, it travels through association, it is universal, but not the defining characteristic of a nation.

284Ibid., 229.

285Servín, *Al final del vacío*, 9.

Vignette: The Rhetorical Value Of Testis

In the last chapter, in treating the logic of resentment and flight in some recent novels set in Mexico, I tangentially touch upon constructions of Mexican masculinity. The next chapter will continue in this vein by demonstrating how these sordid descriptions are in many ways a reflection of the backstabbing cronyism that occur between writers in the literary sphere. The intent of this vignette is to serve as a transition. It is a somewhat tongue-in-cheek reflection on the translation and meaning of a vulgar expression popular among Mexicans. By chronicling a disagreement between an editor and a writer, I wish to convey something of what could be considered as a Mexican male writer's ethos, centered as it unsurprisingly is on male gonads.

Once when Alejandro was telling me about his feelings with respect to Ari, he concluded repeatedly with, "*Ari me da hueva.*" *Hueva* is a word that Ari himself used yesterday when he told me how he felt about driving all the way from his father's house in Interlomas to the Condesa neighborhood where I live, a trip of twenty minutes. In the Dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, the first definition for *hueva* is spawn, roe, or the mass of eggs produced by some fish and amphibians. The second and only other definition is colloquial, signifying negligence and laziness. What Alejandro was saying was that Ari tires him, bores him. If *hueva* is taken as laziness, then Alejandro's phrase could be literally translated as, "Ari makes me lazy," or more precisely, "Ari makes me feel lazy with respect to him." There is not, however, a single word in English that completely captures the range of meaning that is conveyed in Mexico with the use of the word *hueva*. Unlike the English words spawn or roe, *hueva* has a more direct etymological connection to the word for egg, which is also the common word for testis.

A *huevo* is a person that embodies the essence of *hueva*. He is lazy, slow, and even dumb or imbecile. However, since *hueva* also denotes a spawn, one could imagine a *huevo* as a large immobile mass of eggs resting on the bottom of a stream. Nevertheless, since egg is also the common word for testicles, then it only requires one more imaginative step to visualize a *huevo* as a man with testes not unlike the sacs of some spawn. The image that I have in mind comes to me from a fictional public service announcement concerning the Enlarged Scrotum Syndrome in the movie *Johnny Dangerously* (1984). If this etymology has any bearing, Ari makes Alejandro feel like a motionless spawn, or his testes like two roe hanging down between his legs weighing him down. And in the case of Ari, he did not want to drive all the way to my neighborhood from his father's house because he was like a spawn on the couch, or his testes were so swollen that it would have taken an inordinate amount of effort on his part to pick them up off the couch where he lay, get them into his car, and drive all the way out to where I was.

Sometime ago in the *cantina* The Centenario, in the Condesa neighborhood, I was there when Rubén challenged Alejandro for having included the piece written by Ari in *Hasta Atrás*, a section in the weekly magazine *Día Siete*, for which he is its chief editor. As the title suggests, the section appears on the last page of each issue. Articles in this section have a certain prestige not only because of their highly visible placement but because they are short pieces of greater literary value than the articles in the rest of the magazine. Mostly they are written by writers of recognized talent. As Alejandro had told me, his associate José Zepeda Patterson, the director of

the magazine, had questioned him after reading Ari's piece whether or not "this person... who is he anyway?" had the talent or the level of writing to be honored in this way.

In challenging Alejandro, Rubén could be thought as also questioning whether Ari had the "level" of writing that is associated with this section of the magazine. But he really did not say anything to that effect, and since I know how much he admires and respects Ari I think it was not really the thrust of his challenge at all. The better interpretation is that Rubén was poking fun at Alejandro and his magazine. Rubén sees *Día Siete* as mainstream and commercial, which of course it is. He told Alejandro that if he continued publishing articles like the one by "that psychopath," referring to Ari, he might actually change his mind about the magazine, find it more interesting, and start reading it.

Alejandro stood up, cupped his right hand and shook it back and forth out in front of him as if he were jiggling a couple of balls. "This is what I do with yours and everyone else's comments," he said to Rubén. "I pass them through my balls," that is "I pass them through my *huevos*." The testicles that he had out in front of him in his hand, the ones that he was pretending to shake back and forth in front of our faces, were obviously his own. He was telling Rubén that he could care less what anyone said. Perhaps they fazed him as much as the currents of water faze a well-secured spawn. He would publish whomever and whatever he wanted in *his* magazine, damn it. In English, it could be said that Alejandro would let the comments of others about his editorial decisions "go in one ear and out the other." Nevertheless, putting it in this way would miss the vulgarity of what Alejandro said. He was degrading his critics, Rubén and the others, to the level of his balls. Their challenges were to him of no importance, as of little importance as his balls swinging back and forth in the wind.

That Alejandro should have been challenged, yet vigorously defended Ari and his decision to include him in the *Hasta Atrás* section of his magazine is certainly one of the many things that Alejandro did on Ari's behalf that he now feels that Ari has not been sufficiently grateful to him for. It is one of the reasons that Ari is not only losing Alejandro's support and friendship but also frankly making it that all he provokes for Alejandro is *hueva*.

Chapter VI: Literary Mafia

By this point it should be clear that much of the literature that deals with what is conceived as Mexican national character portrays Mexicans in grim terms, as back stabbing and conniving. By giving a picture, in this chapter, of the viscousness of competition within the literary field in Mexico City, I wish to demonstrate how a great part of that national character picture is but a reflection of the writers own reality. The worthlessness and resentful insecurity that Samuel Ramos, for example, described as a national character trait of Mexicans in general, could very well be a reflection of the insecurity that bourgeois intellectuals feel in a country where writers have increasingly a tenuous and relatively marginal standing in the world of cultural production.

Cronyism

Nation is not an adequate term to denote groups of liquid persons. And although clan is more appropriate to the degree that it points to ties that are often important for these individuals, it is still not precise. It would be better to think of secret conspiring fraternities. Secret in the sense that each individuals can never truly know the motives of another, what the other is thinking, when another will betray him or her. Secret also in the sense that power is mediated through the keeping and sharing of secrets, information that can be used in favor of one's own fraternity and against another. Conspiring in the sense that everyone is looking for personal gain. And finally, fraternities because it is close friendship, brotherly alliances, that are most valued, that one depends on most even while suspecting that it is among one's brothers that one counts his or her worst enemies.

As Roderic Camp described politics in Mexico as functioning according to competing patron-client networks called *camarillas*. They are a series of interlocking hierarchical social networks that culminate in the President of the Republic and his close associates. The currency of these networks is information, information that is guarded and traded to the advantage of one individual and his allies over that of others. Personal advancement, material gains, security, and favors are gained through a logic of reciprocity that rewards loyalty to group leaders and other members, known and identified as friends. "Friendship," in these situations should not be understood as only "a private sympathetic sentiment," but rather as a means to power. "Therefore," it is imperative that "personal relationships should be cultivated, the circle of friends extended."²⁸⁶ Accumulating and maintaining friends is as vital to survival and success as accumulating wealth, and even more so since the latter is often derived from the former. The importance of political cliques and the accumulation of friendship are even further accentuated if we add to it that Latin American penchant for idolizing individuals, known as *personalismo*, regarding the person up and above their party affiliations and political ideas.²⁸⁷

But such competing networks and the dedication to leaders over parties and ideologies are two phenomena not limited to politics. As can be appreciated in the novels by Servín, Mendoza, and Yépez, hired assassins, drug traffickers, and other criminal organizations, as well as common citizens on the streets proceed in similar fashion. The Director of the Institute for

²⁸⁶Camp, *Los intelectuales y el estado en el México del siglo XX*, 30; Here Camp is citing the study Dealy, *The public man*.

²⁸⁷Camp, *Los intelectuales y el estado en el México del siglo XX*, 29-34.

Professionalization for the Attorney General in Mexico City, José Luis Pérez Canchola, has said that novels about organized crime “Maybe now more than ever have helped to disarm the complicated reality that we live, where the criminal, the police officer and the politician look so much alike.”²⁸⁸ But in Mexico, it is not only criminals, police officers, and politicians, writers too famously organize themselves into cliques around one or more celebrated leaders. That the most illustrious writers in Mexico should belong to what has often been criticized as a mafia does not only reflect on the resentment of those who felt themselves excluded, but also on the real processes by which cultural production has progressed in the country during the greater part of last century.

The term, “The Mafia”, although an epithet used since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, most specifically indexes a group of writers that are also known as The Generation of Mid Century, its members born roughly between 1921 and 1935.²⁸⁹ As Cohn describes them, they were a tight knit group that monopolized the control and production of elite media, dominating the most important channels by which “high” culture was popularized during a period from the 1940s to the 1970s.²⁹⁰ Such a monopolization of literary production was possible due to the degree of centralization both in the country and in the industry itself. Not only was it the case that one publishing house could produce all the most important works and set the tone for the rest, but there were only a handful of crucial literary supplements, periodicals, and projects that a relatively small group was able to consolidate and keep within their hands. According to Cohn, there were four principle literary institutions or projects with whom all the most widely acclaimed writers were associated and through which their work was disseminated: The publishing house El Fondo de Cultura Económica, the literary supplement *México en la Cultura*, which later became *La Cultura en México*, the Office for the Diffusion of Culture at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, and the fellowship and education program called the Mexican Writers’ Center.²⁹¹

El Fondo de Cultura Económica was established in 1934. And even though it is difficult today to imagine that a single publisher could play a determining role in the literary culture of an entire country, it did from 1948 up until 1965 under the direction of Arnaldo Orfila Reynal (b.1897—d.1997). *México en la Cultura* was founded in 1949 and appeared in the Sunday edition of the newspaper *Novedades*. In 1961, Fernando Benítez (b. 1912—d. 2000), the supplement’s founder and director was forced out due to his support for the Cuban Revolution and his left-leaning politics. The cohesion of the group of writers under Benítez’s, part of the so-called Mafia, including such figures as Carlos Monsiváis, Carlos Fuentes, Jorge Ibargüengoitia, Rosario Castellanos (b.1925), and Elena Poniatowska (b. 1932), can be appreciated by the fact that when Benítez left they all followed him to his new supplement *La Cultura en México*, included among the pages of the newspaper *Siempre!*. Benítez continued to head this publication until 1971 when

288Mesinas, “Novela policiaca: afición de judiciales,” F1.

289For a gloss of the various generations of Mexican writers as developed by Enrique Krauze see Volpi, “The End of the Conspiracy: Intellectuals and Power in 20th-Century Mexico,” 146; Some of the writers that I mention, notably Paz and Juan Rulfo, who were of the previous generation, and Monsiváis, who was of the latter one, while not belonging to the Generation of Mid Century, were undeniably important literary gatekeepers during the latter half of the twentieth century and are included among the Mafia, see Piazza, *La Mafia*.

290Cohn, “The Mexican Intelligentsia, 1950-1968: Cosmopolitanism, National Identity, and the State,” 142-3.

291 That is the *Dirección de Difusión de la Cultura de la Universidad Autónoma de México*, and the *Mexican Center for Writers*.

its directorship was taken over by Monsiváis. Cohn assesses the importance of *México en la Cultura/La Cultura en México* in the following way:

The supplement was one of the most significant players in the cultural debates because it extended the debate over cosmopolitanism at the heart of 'high' culture throughout the nation by infusing it into a popular medium that reached thousands of readers of different backgrounds, classes, and educational levels. It carried pieces on the same topics covered by the literary journals that were often written by the same authors.²⁹²

Along with *México en la Cultura/La Cultura en México*, the Office for the Diffusion of Culture of the National Autonomous University of Mexico was the only other site "in the cultural infrastructure where intellectual and popular culture converged." It too was run and controlled by members of the Mafia. Its director during its most influential period, from 1953 to 1965, was Jaime García Terrés, a tenacious proponent of cosmopolitanism in Mexican letters, who would also substitute for Benítez over at *México en la Cultura* when he would leave town.²⁹³

Finally, the Mexican Writers' Center was established in 1951 with funds from the Rockefeller Foundation. It functioned through a system of annual genre-specific fellowships to writers, who would then attend sessions at the Center presided over by other more established writers who had once been fellows themselves. It would be nearly impossible to find a writer whose work is now included among the cannon of late twentieth century Mexican letters who was not at one time or another associated with the Centro Mexicano de Escritores. It was there that writers "reinforced the connections that bound them together over the years, concentrating power in the hands of a small cultural elite.... The profound impact" that the Center "has had on the course of Mexican literature simply cannot be denied: here, literary paradigms were formed and ideas about canonicity were perpetuated; here, too, the dominant intellectual group was strengthened and its westernizing orientation was reinforced."²⁹⁴

Struggling Against Anonymity

In 2005, then-president Vicente Fox withdrew funding for the Mexican Writers Center, effectively killing the oldest fellowship program for writers in Mexico. José Agustín's (b. 1944) short requiem for the Center, published the same year in the literary supplement *Confabulario*, gives a good idea of not only how the Center functioned but even more importantly some aspects of how one went about undertaking the writer's "hard and horrible struggle against anonymity."²⁹⁵

²⁹²Ibid., 159.

²⁹³Individuals assuming multiple positions among cultural institutions was one way that a small group of writers and editors were able to maintain control over the industry. The most extreme example is perhaps that of the literary critic Emmanuel Carballo who published profusely in *México en la cultura/La Cultura en México*, and in *Revista Mexicana de Literatura*, which he cofounded with Carlos Fuentes; he was briefly on the editorial board of the *Revista de la Universidad de México*, as well as worked in various capacities at El Fondo de Cultura Económica; he co-directed production at Empresas Editoriales, and compiled the cannon constructing volumes: *El cuento mexicano del siglo XX* and *Diecinueve protagonistas de la literatura mexicana del siglo XX*, Ibid., 162.

²⁹⁴Ibid., 165.

²⁹⁵ The phrase is from Piazza, *La Mafia*, 96.

Agustín describes how he “was dying” in 1964 to get a fellowship from the Center, since it was absolutely “decisive” for a young twenty year old writer such as himself, a certain “entry visa into the Republic of Letters.”²⁹⁶ Agustín was at the time in a writers’ workshop headed by Juan José Arreola (b. 1918—d. 2001). For the sake of analysis, we could say that due to his participation in that workshop he belonged to a literary clique lead by Arreola. When Agustín applied that year for a fellowship from the Center, although some of his colleagues from the workshop got funded, Agustín did not. His application was “vetoed” by Juan Rulfo (b. 1917—d. 1986) because there were already too many fellowships being granted to those participating in Arreola’s workshop. Rulfo, by this time had already published the only two books that he would ever write, written while he himself was a fellow at the Center a decade before, and was an inner member of the all important literary clique. The next year Agustín applied again, and Rulfo once again vetoed the acceptance of his application for the same reason.

Then in February of 1966, Agustín and his friend Gustavo Sainz (b. 1940) were interviewed for the magazine *Gente*. Agustín termed what he did in that interview as an “unconscious patricide,” patricide because he severely criticized his mentor Arreola. Agustín was resentful that Arreola had been putting forward others who were getting the fellowship from the Center instead of him. Both he and his friend Sainz criticized Arreola and Rulfo, “not as sacred cows but as hairy beasts, anachronic and obsolete.” Furthermore, Agustín criticized the Mexican Writers’ Center as an institution.²⁹⁷

The interview caused such a sensation that Rulfo responded to it in an interview of his own, published in the newspaper *Excélsior*. Rulfo could not simply dismiss Agustín, in part because a second edition, of fifty thousand copies, of his first novel *La Tumba* was appearing after only a year, and his second novel *De Perfil* had already been accepted for publication by the most avant-garde publishing house at the time, Editorial Joaquín Mortiz.²⁹⁸ The acclaim with which Agustín’s novels were received, gave at least circumstantial support to Agustín’s claim that Rulfo and Arreola were passé. In responding to Agustín in his interview to *Excélsior*, Rulfo went as far as to admit, in a “very ambiguous tone,” that Agustín’s novel *La Tumba* would “demolish the past.” And even more surprisingly, a few days later, Agustín got a call to inform him that his evaluation of the Mexican Writers’ Center had been mistaken, that he should once again apply for a fellowship. Agustín did apply, “of course,” and “magically” received a fellowship for the year 1966-7. His criticisms of the Center long forgotten, he applied again and received the grant also the following year.²⁹⁹

The dynamic of Agustín’s relationship to the Mexican Writers’ Center and the established writers Rulfo and Arreola, is a dynamic that has been repeated time and again by others. Luis Guillermo Piazza (b.1921-d.2007), a self-proclaimed member of the Mafia and author of a documentary and psychedelic book about the group by the same name, launches his text with the following definition: “Mafia: A term that in Italy or the United States implies a certain association of a criminal nature, in Mexico, by strange contrast, is preferentially applied to a supposed, confused and diffused, mysterious group of governors of culture, that everyone attacks and to which

²⁹⁶Agustín, “Réquiem por el Centro Mexicano de Escritores.”

²⁹⁷Ibid.

²⁹⁸ For a history of the publishing house and its relation to literary production in Mexico, see Anderson, “Creating Cultural Prestige: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz.”

²⁹⁹Agustín, “Réquiem por el Centro Mexicano de Escritores.”

everyone yearns to belong.” Writers, as he puts it, struggle hard for recognition both from a reading public and established writers. Sure they complain and criticize when they are unknown, but it is only out of exasperation. Their solitude is quickly forgotten with a few pesos and an ounce of recognition. As Piazza asks:

Why don’t we write, day by day, at the beginning of our career, the chronicle of our hard and horrible struggle against anonymity? Those seasons of indifference and abuse, a sought after public that always slips between our fingers... Without friends, without connections, everything is closed against us. That silence so well organized against those who yearn to eat of publicity’s cake; the sadness and melancholy that frequently knocked us down during the slow years during which we struggled to find an echo in the public... That silent internal agony with no witnesses other than our own bleeding self esteem and failing hearts. That monotonous and eventless agony, written from a progressing suffering, what a marvelous theme!... Yet nobody will write about it, because one grain of success, an editor found, a few pesos (francs) earned, a few articles paid at the rate of some cents per word, the name of somebody we know, known by some thousand people we don’t know and two or three we do, a little publicity... just that can cure one from the past and deposit in their cup the nectar of forgetfulness. Then these tears and these miseries seem as far away as childhood, the old wounds remembered only when they are reopened.³⁰⁰

To this day young Mexican writers are often given to vitriolic critiques of those belonging to previous generations and those holding positions of influence within the culture industry. If they have talent and are lucky, like Agustín was, they are quieted through assimilation into the ranks of letters. If they do not have talent or are not so lucky, they swallow their pride, either resign themselves to marginalization, writing for second and third tier venues, muffling their criticisms sufficiently to maintain their subaltern positions in the industry, or abandon writing altogether.

“The Wave” Literary Movement

Agustín never did become a consecrated member of the “reduced executive committee of the Great Mafia”.³⁰¹ The group of writers with which he is associated and for which he and his friend Sainz are its foremost members, La Onda, although promoted, popular, and acclaimed, remained at the margins of the inner most sanctums of the Mexican Republic of Letters. Today La Onda is classified as part of a countercultural movement. Younger than those in the so-called Generation of Mid Century, Agustín and Sainz developed a style and tone of writing that was more in tune with the rebellious individualism celebrated by rock-and-roll and the Beat Generation than with the collective identity pushed forward through centralizing assimilationist projects, whether national or cosmopolitan.³⁰² If Ramos, long before, and Paz more recently, felt it necessary to begin their analysis with popular characters, if writers of all stripes in Mexico filled their narratives with personalities from the lower classes, Agustín felt no such compunction. The protagonists of his first two novels *La Tumba* and *El Perfil* were relatively privileged self-absorbed teenagers, irreverent and cynical, given to reveling in music, alcohol, drugs, sex, as

300Piazza, *La Mafia*, 96-7.

301The phrase is from Piazza, *Ibid.*, 114.

302See Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The rise of the Mexican counterculture*.

well as melodramatic forays into the arts and romance.

If as Bartra has argued, Mexican nationalism was constructed by bourgeois writers elevating psychological features they found in peasants and proletarians to the level of national ideology, then Agustín and Sainz were the first writers in twentieth century Mexico who made acclaimed literature by avoiding peasants and proletarians, concerning themselves more directly with members of their own class. *La Onda* represents the emergence of a middle class style of writing that for the first time in Mexico was pleased to be about and for a discontented segment of the bourgeoisie that had little interest in what is rural, poor, and provincial, let alone falling in step with the nation-building literature. There is no imagining of an inclusive collective in Agustín, not in the national sense. His protagonists are young and rash, inclined to leisure and the arts, polyglots, belonging to families whose members frequently travel to or have relatives living in Europe and the United States, that is they are a lot like Agustín, Sainz, and most writers, more like them certainly than they are to revolutionary heroes, uncouth *pelados*, or folkloric characters populating the official Mexican cast.

La Onda brought freshness to Mexican prose, an adolescent freedom. By contrast, the writing of Paz about Mexicans had been serious, weighed down with melancholy and nostalgia. As Piazza writes, “Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes observed Mexico City... with the intention of perpetuating it in the present moment through nostalgia.” The protagonists of Agustín’s novels, were impelled rather by a personal liberating drive for pleasure. The Generation of Mid Century, by contrast, in as much as their poetry and prose were concerned, even when frequenting popular nocturnal sites for entertainment were accompanied by a sense of national consciousness. Piazza wrote that in their visits to brothels “now so long ago, Octavio [Paz] pronounced” that Mexican prostitutes were “the most horrendous prostitutes in the world.” And his pronouncement “was like a judgment of Graham Greene in the worst moments of his rage against religious persecution, and it was in reality a declaration of love...”³⁰³

To take what middle class individuals could only consider disgusting and despicable, exorcising it, purifying it in the furnace of literature, rendering it glorious and desirable to elite Mexicans and foreigners alike, this had been the project of that small group of cosmopolitan writers that were successful in monopolizing the cultural means of production in Mexico. Coming after them, inspired by the Beatniks and the rebellious individualism sweeping the urban world in the sixties, *La Onda* writers devised an alternative solution to the problem of writing about Mexico that has become important today, important particularly in the context of that bizarre contemporary conjuncture between electoral democracy and lifestyles focused on personal drama, seduction, choice, and consumption: one person, one vote, one purchase, one life, a style, or multiple styles if you wish.³⁰⁴

From Magical to Bourgeois Realism

Beginning with *On the Road*, “From Kerouac on” the Beats headed to and wrote about Mexico. For them Mexico City was “The Other, Evil, unbridled sin, liberation from the family, Henry

³⁰³Piazza, *La Mafia*, 37-8.

³⁰⁴ For one argument that puts democracy and individual consumer choice together as both resulting from a development in the Western tradition of individualism and governed and mediated through the power of seduction, see Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing modern democracy*.

Miller in a mestizo Paris, the fascination with horror. The Unloading, The End of Responsibility.”³⁰⁵ Jack Kerouac describes the encounter in these words: “Behind us lay the whole of America and everything Dean and I had previously known about life, and life on the road. We had finally found the magic land at the end of the road and we had dreamed the extent of the magic.”³⁰⁶ In finding magic, Kerouac and colleagues assumed an attitude akin to that of the author who Piazza at one point refers to as “the folklorizing Columbian novelist” Gabriel García Márquez, or to that of Rulfo and Fuentes, all prominent members of the literary scene in Mexico City.³⁰⁷

Both the writers belonging to the Generation of Mid Century and the Beat Generation, were most intent on turning their literary gaze to what Paz called that “other Mexico.” The difference, of course, was that while the Beatniks had dreamed of this other world before even traveling there, in theory they could have remained north of the border. Paz and other Mexicans could not escape so easily. They found the “other Mexico” to be intrinsically part of themselves. What is pertinent here is that both groups of writers were at times disgusted by what they encountered. Both saw the “other Mexico” with the eyes of one who comes from a position of relative advantage. William Burroughs wrote to Kerouac in 1951, “Mexico is not simple or gay or idyllic.... It is an Oriental country that reflects 2000 years of disease and poverty and degradation and stupidity and slavery and brutality and psychic and physical terrorism. Mexico is sinister & gloomy & chaotic...”³⁰⁸ And these words could have been penned in a letter by Paz or any number of Mexican authors.³⁰⁹

But the attitude toward Mexico of the Beatniks was not exactly the same as those of their Mexican contemporaries. After describing the inclination of the bohemian visitors to Mexico, Piazza offers this assessment: “For us,” Mexican writers writing from Mexico, “their vision is legendary, mythic, hopeless, we know that” their Mexico “doesn’t exist here but we know also that it doesn’t exist anywhere else either.”³¹⁰ He offers up Fuentes and Paz to his reader as a corrective to their eroticizing vision.

Kerouac, Burroughs, et al., saw in barbaric Mexico a stage on which to play out some aspects of their personal art and rebellion. Burroughs could continue in his letter to Kerouac about Mexico, “I like it myself, but it isn’t for everybody’s taste.”³¹¹ Contrarily, even though they were all critical of the United States, it is doubtful if any of the Beats could have written about the US that it might not be to “everybody’s taste.” Their relationship to Mexico was ultimately established on a misrecognition, or in the very least, a disinterest in it as a country. Howard Campbell acknowledges this much: “the Mexico City College Beatnik scene, like other

305Piazza, *La Mafia*, 37.

306 “Dean” was in fact Neal Cassady.

307Ibid., 15. García Márquez resided in Mexico City from 1961-8, and moved there definitively in 1975.

308Quoted in Campbell, “Beat Mexico: Bohemia, anthropology and 'the Other',” 215.

309 Just to take Burroughs most outlandish claim, that Mexico is an “Oriental country”, Paz also wrote “The sensation that we cause is not diverse than that produced by Orientals. They too, Chinese, Indians, or Arabs, are hermetic and indecipherable.” For those who might be tempted to think that Paz is only referring to the “sensation” that Mexicans provoke in foreigners, I would join this statement with the following: “we are not only enigmatic for strangers, but for ourselves. A Mexican is always a problem, for other Mexicans and for himself” Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*, 72, 77.

310Piazza, *La Mafia*, 37.

311Campbell, “Beat Mexico: Bohemia, anthropology and 'the Other',” 216.

American expatriate communities of the time, was inward-focused and separated to some degree from Mexican life as a whole... the Bohemians sought the strange to stimulate their own poetic imaginations, that is, as a colorful topography for their own autobiographical fictions...³¹² Paz and Fuentes could not afford themselves such a luxury.

Implicated in the national life of Mexico in the same way that the Beat Generation was implicated in that of the United States, they could not celebrate the deprived, unseemly, and grotesque in Mexico with the same detachment and abandon. In pronouncing the prostitutes of Mexico City the most horrendous in the world, Paz was not indulging in a morbid touristic fascination or experiencing the strange as only a way of procuring fodder for his poems. In as much as Paz and others saw themselves mirrored in the depravity and horror in Mexico, they had to go one step further and find in them cause not only for endearment, the Beats did that much, but even more importantly, for collective national redemption.

Not so for Agustín, Sainz, and the rest of those writers participating and inspired by their movement. With the Beats in the United States and their admirers in Mexico, adolescent and irreverent individualism had come of age in literature. It is not adventitious that Agustín was told by one of his professors at the Mexican Writers' Center that he should "go write in the United States."³¹³ As Cohn explains, "la onda writers broke from the older cosmopolitanists by refusing to engage with master narratives of national identity and history, by espousing popular cultural modes and models, and by rejecting prevailing conventions and mores (social as well as literary)."³¹⁴ And in doing so they were in step with a rebellious individualism that today has been appropriated and feeds into some aspects of so-called consumer culture. But even more important for the argument that I am making here, this rebellion and individualism in Mexico implied a turning toward the bourgeoisie, by the bourgeoisie, as a sufficiently rich object for literature.

Middle Class Prose

Both the Generation of Mid Century and the writers of La Onda had at least this in common, they were mostly from middle class families. This does not mean that they were free from penury or from having to struggle to make a living, many times financing themselves and their writing with other forms of employment. I only want to point out that their advantaged upbringing often came with certain affections, for example, the worldly taste of many writers.

An outward looking international mannerism is made abundantly patent in the way that Piazza peppers his free-form Spanish prose documenting the intellectual life during the late sixties with passages in French, English, German, Italian, and Latin, incessantly mentioning cities in Europe and the United States, comparing the literary life in Mexico City with those in Paris, London, and New York, in his portraits of intellectuals, their preferences, well-heeled habits of leisure, in his somewhat cloaked references to orgies, compromising personal entanglements, and jet set pool parties.³¹⁵ And what is even more extraordinary in the history of Mexican letters since the

312Ibid., 214. Campbell's overall argument is that the attitudes and methods of the Beat Generation were no worse than those of many anthropologists at the time, and in many respects much better.

313Agustín, "Réquiem por el Centro Mexicano de Escritores."

314Cohn, "The Mexican Intelligentsia, 1950-1968: Cosmopolitanism, National Identity, and the State," 168.

315 It is impossible here to document all the ways that cosmopolitanism is expressed in the text by Piazza. Much

Revolution, writing a few years after Agustín published his first novels, is that Piazza's social and cultural privilege is not cause for him to be ashamed or to even avoid referencing the more dissolute and deplorable practices of the group in which he insists on including himself.³¹⁶ He writes in the giddy self-indulgent tone of a gossip columnist who expects his readers to squeeze from his every innuendo drops in which to satisfy their envious curiosity.

The Mafia, Piazza writes, is "a subject of a sentence and a title that can be interchanged, with impunity, with The Middle Class..." Here, as throughout his book, he implements that biting, reflexive, and self deprecating humor that was already present in Agustín's novels and which has become even more prevalent today. Exemplary is a story he tells of overhearing the painter, sculpture, and Mafia member, José Luis Cuevas (b. 1934) talking on the phone. Cuevas' interlocutor's reaction to his "hellish little creatures" was apparently the reason that he was being continually interrupted. Exasperated, Cuevas yells into the phone, explaining, "they are insufferably little middle classers" these people. Piazza's daughter, "also exasperated because everyone talks about 'that', asks, 'what is Middle Class, what does it mean?'" Piazza elucidates: "it is an emotional state, a way of feeling insecure."

Those people belonging to the middle class feel insecure because neither do they really participate in all that is done by those above them, nor do they want those below to do so or to encroach on their relatively superior social and cultural position. "And even though we, oh my little daughter, due to the resources that we have and a certain family trajectory on the side of one grandfather, we would in reality be something middle, oh no my little daughter, with respect to everything else we feel secure, so secure, and you see we dress like we want to, and in our apartment the lamp shades are not covered in cellophane. Very secure. Like we want. The resources."³¹⁷

But Piazza has already told us that the Mafia is middle class and that with impunity we can interchange one term for the other. He belongs to the Mafia and is middle class, and he knows it, lets us know that he knows it, and yet still pokes fun at both. And in telling us this little anecdote about Cuevas, himself, and his daughter, with characteristic humor he makes light of how insecure he himself is and how bourgeois his insecurities make him out to be.

The humor continues, yet on a grander scale, when he includes a supposed letter from a man irate at the fact that Carlos Fuentes has won a prize for his part in writing the script with Juan Ibáñez for the film *Los caifanes* (1967). Insecure, bumbling, and middle class, Piazza and his group of colleagues are known by others as the corrupt leaders of an oligarchy.

Mr. Director: With these lines goes out my protest for the award given... so unjustly, to Carlos Fuentes and Juan Ibáñez. Fuentes is the director of the *maffia* of writers, painters... All of us know that the only author of the awarded script was Juanito, but he had to associate himself with Carlitos to obtain the award...

evidence is given in seemingly mundane comments like where he mentions that he had to go to the airport to pick up "a pile of visitors including many relatives from various countries," Piazza, *La Mafia*, 115.

316 It is true that Novo's autobiographical *La estatua de sal* gives a much bawdier portrait of intellectual life in Mexico City of the late teens and early twenties than Piazza's portrait did of the late nineteen sixties. But it is impossible to imagine that Novo's account would have appeared in print in Mexico much before Piazza's.

Novo's book was only published in 1998, Novo, *La estatua de sal*..

317Piazza, *La Mafia*, 93.

Everything was fixed in that way, marvelously, beginning with the award and the distribution of the money. Fuentes even chose his stepdaughter, Julissa, for the principle role in the film... It should be pointed out that it was not his script that won. The *Maffia* won! And remember that nobody in Mexico can stand up against that *Maffia*. Who does not belong to it needs to be a supernatural genius in order to distinguish themselves and prevail against that pack of pestiferous men that infest everything with their unprecedented audacity of wolves in ambush.... They are cynical and say they are sincere; impudent and they judge themselves brave; immoral and they proclaim themselves free and liberated. The men and women of that group link their lives intimately. And then they accept those that substitute them as if nothing happened. They call that, instead of shamelessness, civilization. In some way that plague of parasitic drones that imitate *La Dolce Vita* of Fellini needs to be finished off.³¹⁸

The comic effect is achieved through the juxtaposition of two images: One of a band of friends, with their insecurities, their quibbling, and middle class foibles, with another, represented in the scathing letter above, of a well organized, pernicious, all-powerful as well as hopelessly depraved clique. Piazza acts as a busker, amusing us with ridiculous quips about individuals who are held in high estimation by many and flattered even by the recognition given them by their detractors.

Once at a party of “has-not-beens”, a group of Piazza’s colleagues coming mostly from Mexico and Central America, a former poet and social chronicler wanted to make a list of the people in attendance. She did not want to do the job herself, so she asked those around her to help. First, a nearsighted poet mentioned some Mexican notables that she imagined spotting but that were in fact not in attendance. Then, a woman who was often a prankster, in a loud voice began to make up names of famous personalities. Finally, emboldened by her, a number of other people allowed themselves to be carried away by the excitement and colluded with their own names of attendees, outlandish and impossible. Some women cried with emotion, Piazza informs us, convinced they were in the company of true greats. “A strange complicity envelopes the accomplices.” More names were mentioned. So and so is here “because I saw them, that is my testimony and let it be recorded as a kind of testament... publish it, archive it...”

The journalist took down her notes and the next day in the newspaper there was a chronicle of that “Great Party,” in which it was mentioned that Henry James and his wife, Thomas Mann and some disciples, Einstein, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Faulkner, as well Carlos Pellicer and Salvador Novo were all in attendance.³¹⁹ Piazza concludes the anecdote with a reflection about how monsters are dreamt up. It is all very surrealist for him. Did not André Breton declare : “*Le Mexique c’est le pays le plus surréaliste du monde*”?³²⁰ A public imagining a mafia of literati in

318Ibid., 112-3.

319 Ibid., 61-3. Both Carlos Pellicer and Salvador Novo were at the time renowned writers that had belonged to the important literary group Los Contemporáneos and were part of what Enrique Krauze has called the Generation of 1915, a generation older than Octavio Paz’s and two generations older than those belonging to the Generation of Mid Century and to the clique forming around Carlos Fuentes among which Piazza was a member. For a synopsis of Krauze’s classification of literary generation see Volpi, “The End of the Conspiracy: Intellectuals and Power in 20th-Century Mexico,” 114.

320 “Mexico is the most surrealist country in the world.” The phrase is in French in the original, Piazza, *La Maffia*,

Mexico City is perhaps as ridiculous an image as that of a Rembrandt painting used as an ironing board in Paris.³²¹

The humor of the above anecdote, as of the entire book, is established on the naïveté of those outside and at the margins of the Republic of Letters. You laugh because you feel Piazza winking at you, including you in complicity. So taken are those excluded by an image of the Mafia as an omnipotent gang that they are willing to believe the impossible, that these Mexican artists are capable to attract even the (dead!) geniuses of the world, pulling them into their orbit. But Piazza's book is only part humor; there is in it also the glib cynicism of one who has succeeded in making rank, lording it over those who haven't. There is also the narcissistic reliving of one's importance through even the envious criticism of others, for as Piazza writes, "deep down" many like that they should be criticized for being a mafia, and isn't it true, aren't they truly powerful?

This is why it makes sense that Piazza writes that the Mafia and the middle class are interchangeable terms, not because the two groups are coterminous, but because their members recur to the same strategy. Both the Mafia and the middle class make recourse of a little information, a little education, a little travel, a little means, a little solidarity, in order to drive the largest wedge possible between themselves and those who would come up to compete against them. Driven by the resentful persistence of social climbers and the paranoia of those who feel that their social standing is a rug that at anytime could be pulled out from under them, they vigorously employ their cultural, educational, and economic capital as weapons of distinction.

But what nobody seems to want to recognize is that the position of these cultural elites is also quite precarious. Yes, they have privilege. Yes, they have traveled to Europe and the United States and met so many luminaries. Yes, they have knowledge, and friends in high places. And yes, they use all of the above to monopolize the means of cultural production. But like the lower class *pelados*, their own sense of worthlessness nourishes within them a profound distrust. As Piazza writes: I suspect him; he suspects me; we both suspect a third; all of us suspect each other; everyone suspects everyone. We are all so very insecure.³²²

Literary Fratricide

If it is true that the *mafiosi* themselves "prefer to call each other *amici*, 'friends', 'friends of friends', and their organization *l'onorata società*, 'the honorable society' or 'the society of friends'," it should also be stated, as I have already mentioned with respect to political cliques in Mexico, that these friends are not to be understood as simply those who share among themselves "a private sympathetic sentiment," but more as those who use each other as a means to information, favors, and personal advancement.³²³ Friends are not to be completely trusted, for as individuals know they have often harbored less than favorable opinions of their colleagues, have compromising information about them, and have given expression to these opinions and shared this information when they were obliged to or it promised to benefit them personally, and since this is so, they suspect correctly that others have done the same. Friends, given the appropriate situation, perhaps for a few pieces of silver, with prospects for personal recognition,

63.

321 This image of the surrealist object was given by Marcel Duchamp.

322Ibid., 120.

323Ibid., 89. Here Piazza is referencing a study by Luigi Barzini, Jr., journalist and cultural historian of Italy.

advancement, or psychological release, will betray those closest to them. Piazza's book is a complex dance, a charade in which he dons a series of masks, maneuvering to better his literary performance by uncovering and revealing as much about himself and others as he conceals. And if writers are drawn to each other, form cliques, it is not because sentiments of fraternity run deeper with them. "*This is the only reason that we are close: we are incapable of solidarity.*"³²⁴

"The writer" is a "ferocious monster," Piazza writes, who desperately needs "to sacrifice others... in order to subsist. Dracula and Frankenstein fed on the blood of other monsters that many times they themselves had helped create..." And so he too takes jabs at his colleagues, digging in deep with his feigns at times.³²⁵ Behind public displays of affection and proofs of friendship there is a parallel universe. At the stroke of midnight, he tells us, Latin American writers know that the church bells toll also for them. Especially on Friday and Saturday nights, "in cafés or family homes, in street corners or by telephone... one repeats, what has been repeated since time immemorial, the same pathetic, ridiculous, grotesque, sterile, useful, comforting, obscene, fraternal, fratricidal, parricidal, canine ritual: What do you think of' so and so? Do you think that he has exhausted his creativity? Her work is not worth anything. It is not interesting. That book doesn't contain any ideas. Who is he anyway? And even worse to writers' reputations is if their names are not mentioned at all, if they are left to waste away in the silence of forgetfulness. In literary gossip one is killed and suffers multiple deaths. The only hope that one has is to murder others more effectively than one has been murdered, to turn every occasion into an occasion for the strategic and therapeutic sacrifice of someone else."³²⁶

But it is not only fear of those who would compete with them or challenge their standing that feeds insecurities for writers in Mexico City, but the tenuousness of their position in that scene that is often referred to as "universal literature." That James, Mann, Emerson, and Faulkner should have been resurrected by the pranksters in the incident at the party described above is not in anyway extraordinary. Writers in Mexico City worship at the "universal" pantheon of letters, have the names of Europeans and North Americans of eminence on the tip of their tongues. Coming back from New York, London, or Paris, writers bolster their own standing in the Mexican literary scene by dropping the names of the artists with whom they had contact during their travels, or even better, with whom they became friends.

"Everything was predictable in those parties," wrote Piazza. "Even the dialogue, the constant need to affirm that one, everyone should be in another place, ah Europe ah New York..." To have been elsewhere, to consider that one really should be elsewhere, to be able to look down on Mexico City from the heights of the metropolises of Europe and the United States, or to look down on Latin American writers from the vantage of James, Mann, Emerson, and Faulkner accords individuals specific positional benefits.

The ultimate maneuver in this game, of course, would be to disparage, based on one's own first-

324 Ibid., 147. In the original the quote is set off from the preceding and following paragraph, and appears in italics; it is not clear who exactly Piazza is quoting.

325 The above cited letter is a jab at Fuentes, the degree to which it is done in jest is debatable. In a review of *The Boom in Spanish American Literature* by José Donoso, Alicia Betsy Edwards writes, "The only problem with the book [*La Mafia*] seems to be that Donoso himself is treated rather unkindly at the beginning," Edwards, "Review: The literary boom in Spanish America."

326 Piazza, *La Mafia*, 57.

hand familiarity with them, the objects of admiration: “London so provincial, Paris so provincial, México City so provincial, Buenos Aires so homely, ‘New York so provincial’.” Notice here Piazza feels that he must put his comment about New York in quotes attributing this judgment to the US novelist James Purdy. “Madrid, well, is not even known, Rome nothing happens, Caracas how disgusting, Bogota disgusting, Moscow so provincial and retrograde, Washington there I lost the best-years-of-my-life...” And it is not an evaluation made without knowledge. Those who doubt the narrator’s credentials need only to continue reading as he goes on to describe how easy it is to “become intimately acquainted with the inapproachable innermost snob-life of Paris... You need only to know one member, and in twenty-four hours... you will know them all because each individual of this group knows no one outside. There are only about seventy-five members...”³²⁷

But Piazza is not in Paris or London, and those about whom he writes have all come back to Mexico City to incessantly complain, as he describes, about the provincialism of the Mexican capital, the low level of its literary production, how there is not an appropriate reading public, and to reassure one another that they really deserve to be somewhere else, that their art deserves more than an ancillary stage.³²⁸ After extended stays in foreign cities they have returned to Mexico City and are not happy. They pretended to be happy when they were away. After all they were pilgrims to the centers of artistic creativity. But they really weren’t happy. And now that they are back in Mexico City they are still not happy, must make sure that they are not happy.³²⁹ To confess to happiness in Mexico City would be to embrace mediocrity, or to give evidence of an extraordinary love of country, both which sit poorly with literary excellence in Mexico of the late twentieth century. Unable to make it elsewhere, unable to find the strength to really try, one writes and restricts the sphere of one’s influence to a more accessible peripheral literary metropolis. The only feasible psychological solution to having to live with a writer’s ambition is to be discontent about it all. I am in Mexico because at last Paris, New York, and London are provincial too. I know because I have been there.

But criticism and praise are two practices that serve to solidify, from both sides as it were, a hierarchy by which Paris, London, and New York figure above Mexico City, and prominent European and North American authors above Latin American ones, reinforces the pyramid while practitioners themselves maneuver to better their standing on it. I criticize other metropolitan literary scenes in order to valorize my own. I criticize my own in order to valorize myself. I praise renowned metropolitan authors in order to flagellate myself or criticize the mediocrity of my colleagues. I praise other metropolitan literary scenes with which I am familiar in order to spotlight my connection to them, lament that I do not more fully participate in them, and so my colleagues might valorize me by association. I criticize everywhere and everybody, because I am a writer, and writers thrive on the sacrifice of others, not least of all on their own. I pull others to me, profess to them my affection, because I cannot go at this alone. Deep loves and hatreds, criticism and praise, brought together in a rich and complex interior life, are all elements for literary life. Why is there in this game so much frustration? It is because my power to change my situation is really not as great as I would like, reality does not fit my ambitions.

327Ibid., 33-4.

328Ibid., 115.

329Ibid., 33.

Metropolitan Validation

Piazza's ultimate slam dunk in his cause of personal advancement and the defense of the clique with which he cast his lot, is to remind detractors that his and his colleagues' works have been translated into other languages and have received acclaim by literary critics in the United States and Europe. The Mafia can validate itself with those below by brandishing in their faces the valorization that they have received from those above. Editors in London, Paris, and New York, have begun to be interested "in our works and our writers..." They have, Piazza writes, "been commented on favorably by famous critics in those singular capitals..." Novels written by some belonging to Piazza's literary group have been translated into English, French, and Romanian. We have "passed from the level of cultural underdevelopment" and are "incorporating ourselves," in the realm of literature, "with renewed force into the Western world..."³³⁰

Moreover, to make the argument even more poignant, Piazza juxtaposes a series of excerpts, presumably from literary journals: "'our authors compete in the principle centers with the best of the world'... 'after the political and the economic comes cultural independence' 'no colonialisms or complexes: now Latin-American writers transcend borders, appear on the covers of luxurious magazines, receive international awards, travel, are recognized in distant lands, photographed, winned and dined, interviewed, pampered'..."³³¹ The so-called Boom, of which the Mafia was an important component, was a moment of unprecedented recognition for Latin American writers. After centuries of importing and diligently consuming metropolitan literature, assiduously learning and writing in accord with European forms and dictates, Latin Americans had finally been able to create literature that captured the notice of Europeans. For the first time since the Conquest, editors, critics, and writers from Europe and the United States deemed Latin American literature worthy of attention.

How could these resentful creatures who make those "appalling accusations" of the existence "of coteries, created interests, of groups... of mutual-praise-societies, of exclusive tribes... of clans, of partisanisms, and of the seizing of property," knock such international and remarkable success? "The cosmopolitan consecration of our men of letters and most representative artists" is something that cannot be ignored or dismissed. The Mafia—don't you see?—has been enthroned into that eternal hall of universal letters. "One thing is the orgiastic and bohemian life, the frivolity and snobbism" that so many love to deplore, and quite another "...the silent and quiet labor" that ultimately has been acknowledged in the "bestowing of awards of all kinds and recognition on a supranational level."

The Inferiority Complex of Intellectuals

The inferiority complex, for Ramos, was an expression of the Mexican national character. For Paz, the solitude of Mexicans was an expression of the large divide separating Mexicans one from another and from themselves, and their marginal participation in Western democratic modernity. For Bartra, both Ramos and Paz, "orphans of native bourgeois traditions," sought to elevate personality traits they found in subaltern characters to a national ideology. The diagnosis of the Mexican character was part of a movement that associated subaltern resentment to the

³³⁰Ibid., 122.

³³¹Ibid.

sentiment of national belonging. I am using Piazza to effect one further move. “For a time, the whole problem appears to reside in the Middle Class,” he writes.³³² And what he means by “the whole problem” is the problem of vulnerability and suspicion.

That is—intellectuals, plagued with the insecurity endemic to members of their class, unable to feel true bonds of solidarity with others, project their own sense of worthlessness, distrust, and profound solitude onto the rest of the population. “The Middle Class... is an emotional state, a way of feeling insecure,” explained Piazza to his daughter. Could it be that Paz was only diagnosing the insecurity of his class when he wrote about Mexicans in general, “we are not secure people...”?³³³ Piazza writes about the profound suspicion that plagues the bourgeoisie, and particularly those who dedicate themselves to writing. But Paz and Ramos had already identified distrust as a motivating sentiment for all Mexicans. The writer is a “ferocious monster,” Piazza wrote, who desperately needs “to sacrifice others...” The violence of Mexicans too perhaps is also a literary sublimation of the alienation that writers feel with respect to their colleagues and compatriots and the mortiferous desires they have for everyone else.

Moving Beyond National Character

Although Piazza makes only a few incidental references to the literature on Mexican national character, there are two that are worth considering. One appears in the first chapter of his book. It begins with: “I think that we are in 1967. I like to think that we are in 1967...” To write this Piazza wants to draw attention to the fact that he and his readers are in the present, should be acting as if they were living in the present. Not only this, but things are better now, much better than they were in 1789, for example, the year of the French Revolution, or even the 1950s. Piazza reminisces about “Lola’s gallery” and the conferences that the muralist Diego Rivera gave at the National College during the fifties. It was at these, Piazza writes, that Rivera recognized in public for the first time the painter Rufino Tamayo. Tamayo had left Mexico because he had been excluded by Rivera and his clique of more politically engaged painters, among them José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Tamayo made a name for himself by leaving Mexico, first in New York during the forties, and then in Paris during the fifties. Piazza quotes a dubious acknowledgment made by Rivera of Tamayo and his work: “fashion designers in Paris really like his *pink*.”³³⁴

The fifties was also the period when “the studies on the Mexicanbeing” experienced a particular prominence. Paz wrote his essay *The Labyrinth of Solitude* while in Paris in the late forties and published it in 1950. But 1967 was many years after. So much had happened. Piazza believed that it was high time to move beyond this focus of research. “One of them, one of the investigators, killed himself...” Piazza is referring to the poet Jorge Cuesta who committed suicide in 1942 at the age of thirty-eight. “... the rest have practically all died.” Ramos died in 1959. “Just this morning the son of one of them came to see me and he reiterated that he too would kill himself. I have died several times during these years and it has been the only way to continue living.”³³⁵ It is not only that some of the investigators into the Mexican national

332Ibid., 93.

333Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*, 72.

334Piazza, *La Mafia*, 14. “Pink” is in English in the original.

335Ibid.

character have actually died but this line of research has also suffered, or should suffer, a figurative death. One has had to put to rest older selves and renew oneself since the fifties. “We are in 1967,” in the present, after all, not 1789 or in the 1950s.

The second reference is one contained in a quote about the boom in Latin American literature that Piazza excerpted and I have cited above: “no colonialisms or complexes: now Latin American writers transcend borders, appear on the covers of luxurious magazines, receive international awards, travel, are recognized in distant lands, photographed, win and dine, interviewed, pampered.”³³⁶ Even though it appears in the plural, “complexes” can refer to nothing other than the inferiority complex diagnosed by Ramos. Conquered, colonized, downtrodden, and even worse, ignored, with the boom in popularity of their literature in the latter half of the twentieth century, the Latin American bourgeoisie had finally made it back home, had taken their rightful place at the banquet of Western modernity.

For young writers writing in Mexico City today, though, the boom in popularity in Latin American literature is nothing but history. This is their predicament. No longer are they sought after as the previous generation was, nor can they now close the doors to the world and pretend that the only thing that matters is what they think about themselves. If before the task for Mexican writers was to write about Mexican subalterns and in that way contribute to a national canon, now they have been liberated from such a limitation. They set their narratives in cities across the world or in no particular place at all. They write about bourgeois individuals, or even simply write just about themselves. A writer is only Mexican by chance, just as he or she could have been born English or French. To become and live as a writer in Mexico City is a mixed bag. If one has connections in the city, or is talented, there are quite a few publishing houses and magazine publishers which could publish one’s work. However, as far as the richness of literary activity, Mexico City is still marginal to New York; Paris, or London. Moreover, these days the Mexican literary brand is not what it used to be.

³³⁶Ibid., 122.

Vignette: Writers Conference

As with the other vignettes, this one serves as a counterpoint to chapters based on textual material. In the last chapter, I argued that the so-called inferiority complex of Mexicans can be understood as a reflection of the insecurity that Mexican writers may feel due to their tenuous standing in the international world of letters. This vignette, by contrast, in chronicling my experience at a writers' conference, intends to convey the connection that writers themselves imagine and create with the often sordid world about which they write.

Most of the buildings in Torreón are one story high recent block and cement structures with nothing distinguishing except commercial and political logos painted on them. The streets are wide and dusty. The people are friendly and easy going, although since I was attending the First Conference on Journalism, Literature and Design, I did not really meet very many outside of that context.³³⁷

When I woke up on the bus Thursday morning the sun was just coming up. The horizon was defined by the impenetrable blackness of the landscape and a sky that was lighting up in shades of gray and brilliant white. What was amazing was how straight the horizon was, a relatively unwavering line that encircled us three hundred and sixty degrees. I remember these landscapes from my childhood, when I lived not too far away in the Mexican state of Nuevo León. The sky in this part of Mexico is enormous. Where we were traveling there were no nearby mountains or buildings to obstruct it. Torreón is located in a flat desert with little vegetation except for a few cacti and other xerophytes.

The hotel where everyone stayed was the Camino Real, certainly the most expensive in town. I stayed in a room with Alejandro in order not to have to pay for one myself. Alejandro also signed off on all my eating and drinking expenses during the time that he was there, which was extremely considerate of him. When he returned to Mexico City on Saturday morning, he also left the room to me. Saturday night Rogelio was able to get in on Alejandro's generosity and stayed with me since the newspaper that was sponsoring the event, *El siglo de Torreón*, only paid for his room for Friday night.

When I walked into the hotel on Thursday morning, Alejandro was already sitting down having breakfast with Guillermo Fadanelli and his business associate Rita Varela. Sometime later, a group of presenters arrived in from the airport. Among them was Mauricio Carrera, a person that I have wanted to talk to since I met him at a poker game sometime back at David Lida's house. We spoke briefly and he recommended that I should get in contact with an anthropologist here in Mexico who both writes "anthropological texts" and "literature".

The first conference session consisted of presentations by Alejandro, Mauricio, and Guillermo. The audience was mostly made up of university students who are interested in communications. Guillermo knew how to work the crowd and after a while everyone was clapping after everything he said. After the session, the director of public relations for *El Siglo de Torreón* took

337 The conference was for university students interested in careers in communications and co-sponsored by the local newspaper *El Siglo de Torreón*, the radio station Grupo Radio Estéreo Mayrán (GREM) and universities of the area.

us all out to eat and drink until the afternoon session began. The session was on newspaper and magazine design, and Goris, the graphic designer for the publisher of *Día Siete*, was part of it.

That night we went to a cantina. In it, was a long wooden bar that swerved around, making a sinusoidal loop. The yellow of the bar and roof contrasted with the blue of the walls. It was one of those places where women are half servers and half entertainers, *ficheras* they are called in Mexico. They serve drinks, and if a man buys them one too, tips them appropriately, they will sit and talk with him, dance with him, and for a price might even go back home or to a hotel with him. Most commonly, as I am told, men in these bars, more than anything else, just want to talk. The few men that were in the cantina that night sat on one side of the bar and the women on the other, chatting for as long as we were there.³³⁸

In one corner, a jukebox had anything and everything on it. Those of us from the conference sat around a table and ordered beers brought to the table in tin buckets full of ice. Altogether, we were ten people, including Alejandro, Goris, Mauricio, and Guillermo. What was surprising was that the bill came to so little. We joked that it would be cheaper to fly out to Torreón for the weekend than to stay and drink in the Condesa neighborhood in Mexico City.

Inspired by the atmosphere, the conversation soon turned to cantinas and sex clubs that people had been to in Mexico City. One of the graphic designers had introduced Guillermo to a series of them in working class neighborhoods. One place was called the Chaqueta, which is slang for masturbation. They charged, whenever it was that they went there, the equivalent of eighty cents as cover charge. "With that you got a beer and whatever sex you could get," they informed us. They described one act called "the cascade". A woman will line up four or five men sitting on chairs on stage with their pants down around their ankles. She will turn and face the audience, and then sit down on their erect members, one after the other, pumping each a few times before going on to the next. She keeps this up, going from one man to the next, until they have all ejaculated.

Somebody also told a story about a man with an extraordinarily large penis. He would go around the bar using his generous endowment to stir clients' rum and cokes. People would even drink them afterward, or that is what they said. Along those lines was a story about a woman that would take pieces of ice out of people's drinks, put them into her vagina, and then return them so that clients could drink some of her "pussy juice". Many other stories of the same ilk were exchanged. One particularly vivid image was that of a large woman on stage on all fours and five small men swarming her, penetrating her orifices with their diminutive members, tongues and fingers.

Friday morning at breakfast, I met Álvaro Enrigue. He is one of the editors for *Letras Libres*. All day Friday, there were presentations by magazine and newspaper editors. Álvaro presented in the morning with editors from *Día Siete*. In the afternoon, Rogelio also presented. Friday night I went to a book presentation that was not related to the conference, with Rogelio and another writer from Torreón. We arrived at the function late. As we entered, the person with the microphone interrupted his presentation to thank Rogelio for showing up. Rogelio is well known in Torreón because his father was much respected as an editor and writer there. From the stories

338 For a good portrait of a *fichera* as well as a chronicle of some sordid Mexican nightspots, see Lida, "Las noches salvajes de la Ciudad."

that I was told, apparently he was also quite the beatnik.

That night *El Siglo de Torreón* treated us yet again to dinner. After being dropped off back at the hotel, some of our group went up to their rooms, the rest, including Alejandro, Rita, Álvaro, and the writer Javier García Galeano, decided to go out for a nightcap. The first place we found was a karaoke bar. At one point, we all got up on stage and sang a song together. Most of the people there were teenagers from Monterrey. When the place closed at two in the morning, we asked a taxicab driver to take us to another. Since the city government in Torreón is controlled by the right-of-center and morally conservative National Action Party (PAN), we had to cross the river to the neighboring city of Gómez Palacio in the state of Durango to find a bar that was still open at that hour.

As we crossed the river dividing the two cities, I remember Alejandro telling us a story about his Jewish ancestry. Earlier Álvaro told me, even though he is not a Christian, he finds anyone who does not read the Bible uninteresting. Right before the taxicab driver dropped us off at the bar, we all broke out singing a hymn. There were fifty or so people milling about outside of the place that the taxicab driver took us to, most of them men in cowboy hats and boots. Immediately we felt out of place, so much so that Alejandro asked the taxicab driver to stick around for a few minutes just in case we decided that it was too much for us and we needed to leave right away. The bar was large, and because of the low hanging ceiling, the smoke, and the lighting, it was impossible to see from one end of it to the other. There was a band playing ranchera and cumbia music, and a cement dance floor where a dozen or so couples were dancing. The rest of the floor was covered by a worn and grimy carpet splotted with cigarette burns.

When I went to the bathroom and urinated into the trough there, I had the sensation that the men around me, at any moment, were either going to beat the hell out of me or suddenly turn and drench me with their urine. The only people that seemed to treat us with any friendliness whatsoever were the prostitutes. Imagine the urbane Javier García Galeano, with his mid-twentieth century gentleman's hat, juxtaposed with that of a burly Mexican cowboy. We were conspicuously out of place. Somebody came back from the bathroom to tell us he had seen two men kissing while stroking each other's cocks. Then somebody else said that he saw a man in the bathroom with a syringe hanging from his arm. It struck me that the suggestible imagination of writers was at work, and that the situation might be less seedy than we were making it out to be. At any rate, we decided to go back to the hotel. Before we left, however, somebody went back to the men's room and scored a large rock of something I will not mention by name, which he snuck out tucked into one of his socks.

The rest of the night, until the sun came up, was spent talking and drinking back at Alejandro's and my hotel room. Alejandro told stories about his narrow escape from Haiti, during a moment of unrest. He had to flee the country through its border with the Dominican Republic. He spoke about his early ambitions of becoming a war journalist. "They are the only real journalists, you know." As in times of work, Alejandro called upon Rita to support him in his endeavor. However, as always, she also had her own agenda, opinions and points to make. Rita sat at the edge of my bed. Alejandro mostly stood, pacing around and gesturing emphatically as to better draw us into his narrative. Javier was lying down with his legs next to Rita. Álvaro lay on Alejandro's bed. I sat in a chair facing them.

There was something in Alejandro's story about flying to Miami from the Dominican Republic. At this point in the account a woman made her entrance. Or was she the whole reason for the story in the first place? They met at a grocery store, or was it a restaurant? The essential detail was that they discussed wine. Alejandro impressed her with his knowledge of wines, and it seemed sought to impress us as well. What wine did he order? What was the food that he chose to pair it with? I have forgotten. What I remember is that the meal was exquisite, its cost exorbitant, and there was something that complicated or eventually made his relationship to the woman impossible.

Finally, the conversation turned to the magazine business. Alejandro expounded on his work ethic. He came out in support of the human rights journalist Lydia Cacho when she was accused of defamation, a criminal charge in Mexico. She was arrested and detained in what now is widely considered to have been an act of retaliation effected by the governor of the State of Puebla on behalf of individuals involved in a child pornography and prostitution ring. At the time, nobody knew why Ms. Cacho had been arrested, but Alejandro came out and organized others in her favor although he is not particularly close to her or her work.³³⁹

"Why is *Letras Libres* so elitist?" challenged Alejandro. To defend himself Álvaro sat up in bed. According to Alejandro, *Día Siete* was conducting a public service by being one of the most widely distributed magazines in Mexico, outside of some gossip and celebrity magazines. Alejandro claimed that he was bringing good writing to the masses. He gestured toward Javier. "I publish him, as well as so many other of the best writers in Mexico." Alejandro was impassioned in his arguments, Álvaro cool in his defense. "*Letras Libres* is not a large enterprise like yours," he explained. "We are a total of only eight families that make a living from our magazine." *Letras Libres* appeals to a niche market, those who want the very best in literary writing. "We don't compete for your customers. We are glad that you are out there. Ours is an alliance, if you will, between our eight families and a few select readers. The benefit for me is that I get to feed my family while doing something that I enjoy." That being so, *Letras Libres* is also experimenting with reaching a broader audience. For example, they have made all their articles available online for free.

Though they never did arrive at an agreement with respect to editorial strategy or what Alejandro saw as a responsibility to reach as many readers as possible, they did conclude the evenings with an agreement. Álvaro defended himself and his colleagues at *Letras Libres* from those who have called them a mafia. They are just eight families, he repeated, making a living with no ambitions other than to serve their readers. Were they not justified in making a living and defending their own? "We are a family business. When somebody attacks one of us, they are attacking family." This seemed to be a logic that Alejandro could understand. He agreed, and emphasized that he too uses anything and everything within his power to defend his own. If you go down the roster of presenters for the conference, they are all friends of Alejandro. Nobody can fault him for not helping his friends out. At seven in the morning they left for the airport, leaving the room all to me.

339For a summary of the incident, see McKinley, "Defamation Case Raises Issues of Fairness in Mexico."

Chapter VII: From State to Market

In Chapter III, I already referred to a shift that occurred beginning in the eighties and taking full effect during the Salinas de Gortari administration. The terrain for writers changed from predominately focused on the state to one governed by market logic. Important to this shift was both the loosening of government control and censorship of writers and publishing venues as well as the implementation of a neoliberal rationale of profit optimization management.

Intellectuals and Political Power

To argue that both politics and the market conform today to an individualized consumer logic is only another way of arguing that politics has lost its organizing role in the life of individuals, ceded its place to pecuniary concerns. A good way to track this transformation, given the focus of this research, is to study the relationship between the state and intellectuals. It appears that as far as intellectuals in Mexico are concerned, they have been eating out of only one hand—that of the state. All good things, including an appropriately adoring public and means of subsistence, came to them through political dispensation. It was only since the 1980s that intellectuals have been able to begin playing off their successes in the market to gain for themselves some autonomy from the government. Not only has advancement, influence, and power functioned through competing cliquish networks in both political and literary spheres, but these networks have been extensions of each other throughout Mexican history.

Beginning with modernization at the beginning of the twentieth century, writes Rama, a much stronger emphasis began to be placed on specialization. He quotes Pedro Henríquez Ureña, “A division of labor began. Men of intellectual professions now attempted to limit themselves to their chosen tasks and abandon politics.... The helm of the state passed into the hands of those who were nothing but politicians...” It is during this time that an ideology of specialization began to gain traction. It has only been of late, however, that it has begun to reflect a reality in the city of letters. The truth is that intellectuals did not abandon politics in Latin America throughout the length of the twentieth century. Intellectuals continued to be “exponents of the tenacious myth—adopted from French thought of the independence period, nourished by nineteenth-century liberalism, and steadfastly maintained thereafter by each generation of *letrados*—that men of letters are best suited to conduct political affairs....” If it is not the case in other areas of the world, Latin American intellectuals have always regarded politics as a natural outgrowth of their intellectual pursuits.³⁴⁰

Mexico City was exceptional in this respect. “Indeed,” writes Rama, “no country of Latin America better exemplifies the *letrados*’ covetous approach to power than does Mexico, and this is just as one might expect in the society that, as the former Viceroyalty of New Spain, saw the creation of the first and most sustained colonial version of the lettered city.” The consonance between the state and intellectuals reached a peak during the Porfiriato of the late nineteenth century. “One can sense, in the Mexico City of Porfirio Díaz, the conjugation, with an intensity not found in other Latin American capitals, of two complementary forces: an eagerness, on the part of the *letrados*, to enter the charmed circles of power; and an anxiousness, on the part of the government, to attract the *letrados* to its service.” This “conjugation” of complementary forces

³⁴⁰Rama, *The lettered city*, 77.

did not only reflect on the large number of intellectuals serving in government posts, but a greater dependence overall of intellectuals on the government. From the time that the Republic was restored with the defeat and execution of Emperor Maximilian I in 1867, to when Porfirio Díaz was ousted in the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the percentage of intellectuals who derived their livelihood from the government went up from twelve to seventy percent.³⁴¹

Not only is political power essentially irresistible to intellectuals in Mexico, but over the past century their incorporation into political ranks have conformed to identifiable modalities. Perhaps one of the most common and distinguished is that of critic-diplomat. Emblematic are Antonio Caso and Alfonso Reyes, both philosophers who made early contributions to the diagnosis of the Mexican character as well as serving as diplomats.³⁴² Jaime García Terrés, who I have already mentioned as head of the Direction of Cultural Diffusion of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, also headed the Fondo de Cultura Económica, was a diplomat, as was the literary critic José Luis Martínez. Octavio Paz too, was a diplomat in the United States, France, and Ambassador to India. It was while serving in France that he wrote his pivotal essay that I have been drawing on, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Rosario Castellanos was Ambassador to Israel. Finally, Carlos Fuentes, son of diplomats, famed head of the so-called literary mafia in Mexico, served in the United Kingdom, other countries, as well as Ambassador to France.

Then there are those intellectuals who were also public ministers. José Vasconcelos, author of the official integrationist racial doctrine of the Mexican State, was also the creator of The Department of Public Education and its first Secretary. The novelist Jorge Volpi calls him “usurpassedly ambitious” since he went as far as seeking for himself the presidency in the elections of 1929.³⁴³ Jaime Torres Bodet, novelist, poet, and the first editor of *Contemporaneos*, the chief periodical of the literary group to which Salvador Novo also belonged, besides serving as diplomat in Europe also became Minister of Education, Foreign Minister, led the first Mexican delegation to the United Nations, and was one of the drafters of the charter for the Organization of American States. José Gorostiza, poet, also member of the literary group *Contemporaneos*, as well as serving as diplomat in various European countries became Secretary of Foreign Relations and President of the National Commission on Nuclear Energy. Finally, Agustín Yáñez, who wrote one of the most acclaimed novels of the twentieth century, *Al filo del agua*, served as Secretary of Education after his term as Governor for the state of Jalisco.

The point is that networks of writers and networks of politicians overlapped and were entangled. Many writers were politicians and many politicians were writers. They went to the same schools, were trained by the same professors, were friends, and even part of the same families. As Cohn puts it, “both the political and the cultural aspirants were often in the same circles. Also, a number of the people... taught at the secondary and university levels students who later became leading public figures...”³⁴⁴ Furthermore, politics was the best way to finance a literary career. How else was one to make a living in a country where people respected the man of letters, but

341Ibid., 86-88.

342 Two articles by Caso are included in Roger Bartra’s anthology of studies of the Mexican national character, *Anatomía del Mexicano* Bartra, *Anatomía del mexicano*, 55-61.. Likewise, Alfonso Reyes also dealt with Mexicaness in many essays, perhaps most famously in one titled “La x en la frente”.

343Volpi, “The End of the Conspiracy: Intellectuals and Power in 20th-Century Mexico,” 147.

344Cohn, “The Mexican Intelligentsia, 1950-1968: Cosmopolitanism, National Identity, and the State,” 173.

read him so little?

However, more important than describing the overlap between networks and the history of specific politicians and intellectuals during the twentieth century, in this chapter I want to give a general outline of the developments beginning in the 1960s that fundamentally transformed the relationship between the state and intellectuals in Mexico. If looked at from a crude materialist perspective of exchange, the state has bargained with intellectuals with its resources and control over certain institutions. Intellectuals, on the other hand, as intellectuals bargained with the state with their allegiances, what they said and published about the state and specific politicians. As far as the state was concerned, intellectuals could be rewarded with political positions and through the allocation of resources, or contrarily persecuted through whatever means the state had at its disposal, including imprisonment. As far as intellectuals were concerned, they could either be apologists for the state and certain politicians, along the lines of Martín Luis Guzmán, novelist of the Mexican Revolution, or sworn critic, along the lines of the often imprisoned writer and member of the Mexican Communist Party, José Revueltas.

Funds flow directly from government to writers primarily through the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA) and the National Council for Culture and the Arts (CONACULTA) and indirectly through public universities and their programs, like the pivotal literary project of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Casa del Lago, or independent projects like the now defunct Mexican Writers Center. As Sallie Hughes explains in the case of journalists, “Until the late 1980s, the government was a major player in the economy, and newspapers relied heavily on advertising from government agencies and state-owned companies. As a private industry that was protected and promoted by the state, publications received subsidies for newsprint and imported inputs. The federal government also looked the other way, if necessary, when newspapers missed payments on taxes or workers’ social security quotas.”³⁴⁵ This continues to be true today, as far as governmental support through advertising is concerned, for any academic, literary, or less commercially oriented periodicals. “The president, ruling party, and most government agencies,” continues Hughes, “made direct payments to supportive reporters and newspaper owners. Moreover, reporters received percentages of the revenue from advertisements they sold to their sources.”³⁴⁶

An example of the extraordinary reach that the government had in its control of intellectuals is that which it exerted by monopolizing the paper supply through the state run company Producer and Importer of Paper (PIPSA). The government quite literally supported book publishers and newspapers by selling them paper below the market value, this reduced their costs and allowed them an additional source of revenue through the sale of surplus paper to others who were not so directly favored by the government. There were occasions when publishers were punished for printing something not in line with the government by having their PIPSA supply of paper cut off. Although it was possible to get paper elsewhere, the market was such that between 1940 and 1976, there were no periodicals that survived for more than a year without PIPSA support.³⁴⁷

As I have already argued, beginning in the 1930s, particularly with the Lázaro Cárdenas administration, and continuing for the duration of the Mexican Miracle of economic and national

345Hughes, “From the Inside Out: How institutional entrepreneurs transformed Mexican journalism,” 96.

346Ibid., 98.

347Cohn, “The Mexican Intelligentsia, 1950-1968: Cosmopolitanism, National Identity, and the State,” 174.

development up until the 1960s, intellectuals were on board with the state's national project. Even in the 1970s, at least journalists with their particularly close relationship to the government, continued to see themselves as integral to the clientalist state that provided Mexicans with growth and stability. Hughes cites Roberto Rock, editor of Mexico City's oldest newspaper, *El Universal*, on the ethos of journalists during this time.

They were transcribers, let's say, of official information. But that's because the newspapers were that way, too. There wasn't any grave moral conflict. I don't know about other countries, but in this country the Mexican state was a benefactor state. Let's say an authoritarian state, but that didn't matter to many people because their problems of survival and support were taken care of... It wasn't even an issue of corruption, it was an issue of ideological conviction... The old journalists assumed that supporting the government and eventually helping out some friends close to the newspaper companies was what it was all about. And they felt important because of that.³⁴⁸

Part of the Mexican Miracle, it should be stated, was that intellectuals viewed their own success, as intellectuals, closely associated to the success of the state. Since they saw the state as a benefactor, as acting in the greater good, and even as revolutionary and therefore morally superior to the capitalist and imperialist state to the north, intellectuals took a "passive, noncritical approach," submitting themselves to the interests of the state. Put in another way, "Self-censorship was common not only because of latent threats but because of internalized agreements on which subjects should be supported and which vetoed." What was most important for the government was that intellectuals maintain the legitimacy of the single-party state, the image of the omnipotent president and his ability to overcome any shortcomings of the previous administration, the facade of competitive elections, and for them to publicly ostracize governmental critics.³⁴⁹

Although many intellectuals continued to collaborate with the government in this manner up until the 1980s, since the 1960s significant numbers began to express criticisms. One of the first outright and visible conflicts between intellectuals and the state occurred around the translation and publication of *The Children of Sanchez*, by the American anthropologist Oscar Lewis. The book gives a dystopian view of the poor in Mexico City, recounting the stories and conflicts of a family living in the rough centrally located neighborhood Tepito. Lewis is credited for founding an area of investigation that is known as the "culture of poverty". His book was published in 1961 in the United States, but because of governmental pressure, not published in Mexico until 1964, and only then because of the support that it received by well positioned intellectuals.

What made the book so detestable to the Mexican authorities, was that it flew in the face of the national myth. In that myth, peasants, workers, and the poor are given a beatified role to play. After all it was they that fought against and overcame oppressors in the Mexican Revolution, and it was in their name and in their interests that the paternalist government of the Institutionalized Revolutionary Party now governed. To reveal that the poor continued to exist, and moreover to argue that their "culture of poverty" was an obstacle to any betterment of their condition, was not only to reveal the Mexican Miracle as less than miraculous, but to strike at the moral basis from

348Hughes, "From the Inside Out: How institutional entrepreneurs transformed Mexican journalism," 93-4.

349Ibid., 94.

which the state derived legitimacy. The incident made clear the government did not consider it appropriate for intellectuals to speak of squalor in Mexico. Particularly unacceptable, in the case of Lewis, was that he was from the United States. What right did an American have to come to Mexico and challenge a revolutionary government who was responsible for bringing equality and modernization to an entire nation?

The president of the editorial house Fondo de Cultura Económica (FCE), who was responsible for pushing for the publication of Lewis' book, was removed the following year. The government justified this action by claiming that Orfila Reynal, born in Argentina, was not the ideal person for heading up an institution that was as important as the FCE to Mexican letters.³⁵⁰ In a similar move, García Terrés was removed from the Office for the Diffusion of Culture at the UNAM, in 1966. Ten years later Julio Scherer García was forced out by president Luis Echeverría as editor of the newspaper *Excélsior* for his critical positions. Others, however, have already written this history.³⁵¹

By referring to the incident over Lewis' *The Children of Sanchez*, I want to give a sense of how things have opened up in Mexico for intellectuals and writers. The sordid and pessimistic writing that I have made reference to in this dissertation would not have been published four decades earlier. As the PRI fractured as a party in Mexico, so did its social and cultural control over increasingly independent minded intellectuals. The inadequate governmental response to the earthquake that devastated Mexico City in 1985, the emergence and increased strength of independent organizations outside of the official party, the civic minded reform and critical stance of important city newspapers, all undermined the legitimacy of the state. In the general elections of 1988, the one-party state received the greatest challenge it had in sixty years. All these developments, altered the terms of the bargain between state and intellectuals. Seemingly overnight, the market value of intellectual allegiances and favorable opinions shot up. Only months after assuming the presidency in 1988, Salinas de Gortari founded the National Fund for Culture and the Arts (FONCA) through which he channeled funds to artists and intellectuals, attempting to orchestrate a new accord with them, replacing the one that had soured over the previous administrations. Even if he was successful in winning the election for his successor, the dramatic devaluation of the Mexican peso that occurred weeks after Salinas left office, as well as other developments, resulted in the 1994 general election being the last the PRI would win after winning them all for over seventy years.

Vuelta vs. Nexos

The newspaper *Excélsior*, under the direction of Julio Scherer, was one of the first successful editorial projects in developing an independent and critical attitude with respect to the government. In 1972, its liberal and critical tone resulted in the private sector withdrawing advertising from the paper. In a move to save it, president Echeverría ordered the public sector to support it with advertising. In that same year, Scherer brought on Octavio Paz who created and edited a literary supplement called *Plural*. As the name implies, it was intended to bring together a plurality of independent voices in Mexico. By 1976, however, Scherer and his newspaper had

350Cohn, "The Mexican Intelligentsia, 1950-1968: Cosmopolitanism, National Identity, and the State," 176.

351For an account of the extent to which the government has gone to coerce intellectuals, see Rodríguez Manguía, *La otra guerra secreta*.

fallen from grace and he was removed by Echeverría. Upon leaving *Excélsior*, Paz founded the literary magazine *Vuelta*.

It has become commonplace, as describes Maarten van Delden, to see the intellectual sphere in Mexico from the 1970s to the 1990s as divided into two camps, one aligned with Paz and the magazine *Vuelta*, and the other with Héctor Aguilar Camín and the magazine *Nexos*. They were two “mini-mafias” who confronted each other for the first time in public in 1977-8 in an exchange between Paz and Carlos Monsiváis. Monsiváis, as many of those who became associated with *Nexos*, belonged to the so-called 1968 generation, those who had sympathised with repressed student and worker movements.³⁵²

Paz, blaming the government for the demise of his supplement *Plural*, understandably vindicated an independent and critical role for intellectuals in his new venture *Vuelta*. In his inaugural essay, he complains “the State continues to be the determining power in Mexico. The government lives and grows at the expense of society.” Under these circumstances, *Vuelta* would not be just another “organ of orthodoxy,” but “a place of confluence for many solitary and free voices.” As a poet and essayist, Paz celebrated the power of literature. “Of course, literature does not save the world; but at least it makes it more visible: it represents it or, better yet, presents it. At times, also, it transforms it; and at others, transcends it. The presentation of reality almost always includes its critic.”³⁵³

Similarly, *Nexos* declared itself in its opening editorial in 1978 as a “place of crossings and connections, point of linkage for experiences and disciplines that specialization has tended to separate, and even oppose.” If the banner for *Vuelta* was the critical independence of intellectuals, then *Nexos* rallied around a call for intellectuals to commit to engaging with “social reality”. Specifically, the editors of *Nexos* challenged intellectuals to link their work with the “concerns of the masses” and the “multiple factors that impede, complicate and deform our development, and ratify or increase privileges and inequality.”³⁵⁴

For Aguilar Camín the figure of the dissident intellectual celebrated by Paz was an expression of a species of narcissism. “For the intellectuals of *Nexos*,” writes van Delden, “it must have seemed that, for the *Vuelta* group, to be a free thinking intellectual meant to be critical of Marxism and free of commitments to the progressive causes of the epoch.” Intellectuals associated with *Vuelta* followed closely the criticism of Marxism as an authoritarian tradition by the *nouveaux philosophes* in France. The anthropologist Roger Bartra responded in *Nexos* by criticizing the *nouveaux philosophes* as “little philosophers” and “guard dogs of the capitalist State.” They are “dangerously invoking,” he wrote, “the forces that have already unleashed in Europe the most dramatic and unrestrained repressions,” as for example against the Rote Armee Fraktion in Germany and the Brigati Rossi in Italy.³⁵⁵

However, van Delden cautions against overly polarizing the difference between the two journals. Even when the perspective taken by writers in *Nexos* can be considered Marxist, it was not orthodox. Furthermore, in as much as literature was concerned, “*Nexos* appears much like

352Van Delden, “Conjunciones y Disyunciones: La rivalidad entre *Vuelta* y *Nexos*,” 105.

353Ibid., 107.

354Ibid., 108.

355Ibid., 109-11.

Vuelta.” The intellectuals of *Nexos* took issue with Paz’s political stances, and even his conclusions about Mexican history and culture, but never the literary aspects of his work.³⁵⁶

The conclusion of van Delden’s article is that the Zapatista uprising in 1994 marked a resolution of the polemic between *Vuelta* and *Nexos* groups.³⁵⁷ He points out that both journals came out against violence as a way for addressing underdevelopment and injustices. What is even more remarkable, however, is the way that both groups rallied around a cause that had been entirely absent from both periodicals in the 1970s. The uprising in Chiapas, argued Aguilar Camín, demonstrates the urgent necessity to complete “the pending democratic transition.” Rosa Algina Garavito Elías, also wrote in *Nexos* that the project of the rebels, “is a national project at whose center is the demand for democracy.” In taking this position, they finally had no point of contention with *Vuelta*. Paz judged that the “iniquities that the indigenous communities in Chiapas are denouncing are very real and their demands are just,” and that there “will be no tranquility in the country until methods and mechanisms are found that assure clean and uncontested elections.”³⁵⁸

After the decline of Marxism and large scale progressive projects in Mexico, it seems that there is no greater good, and on this point all intellectuals appear to agree, than to struggle for and protect the institution electoral democracy and voting as a practice. Paz had attributed to democracy the power to undermine an authoritarian tradition in Mexico, and to help overcome discrepancies in wealth, education, and access to institutions between different sectors of the population. And in his celebration of electoral democracy, he has been joined by his one time ardent critic on the left, Roger Bartra, who also saw it as the only way to resolve the blood and violence that has continued to bathe Mexican history.

Adopting Market Reasoning

The turn to democracy coincides with a turn toward the market in Mexico. In 1983 the Miguel de la Madrid administration began to emphasize a market logic and to utilize a rhetoric of decentralization in creating the Federal Government’s System of Social Communication. In reality, de la Madrid’s policy actually strengthened, in many respects, the governments participation in the media. But instead of using this increased participation to create public service television programming, the government employed its stations to compete with private stations on their own terms, thus reinforcing the ubiquity of commercial programming on Mexican television.³⁵⁹

Similarly in 1992, the Salinas de Gortari administration with its Federal Law on Cinematography, disinvested from the film industry. In Mexico, film had been in essence a public institution. Given the new limitations, surprising enough The Mexican Institute of Cinematography achieved moderate success during this period. What changed was that the government had come to be considered an obstacle to the proper development of the film

356Ibid., 114.

357It is also the Zapatista uprising that became a landmark in the shift from state-controlled to a more market driven investigative journalism. Hughes, on this point, cites Alejandro Páez, Hughes, “From the Inside Out: How institutional entrepreneurs transformed Mexican journalism,” 106.

358Van Delden, “Conjunciones y Disyunciones: La rivalidad entre *Vuelta* y *Nexos*,” 114-6.

359Sánchez Ruiz, “Los Medios de Comunicación Masiva en México, 1968-2000,” 422-6.

industry. In making public policy, legislators began to appeal to the functioning of the market as never before: “if it does not sell, it isn’t efficient.” In just a few years politicians abandoned “any type of patriotism or idea of ‘the national’” as a principle guiding the gestation of the media.³⁶⁰

In as much as *Vuelta* and *Nexos* can be seen as representing two poles among intellectuals, their difference had mostly to do with the distinct vision of the national project that they conveyed. The solitary independent intellectual championed by Paz, contrasted sharply with the engaged intellectual who envisioned his or her analysis in the service of a collective cause. In coming together to champion the cause of democracy, in 1994, intellectuals in both formerly divided groups sharply criticized what they saw as the undemocratic one-party state, as well as strengthened their role as professional critics of the government. The turn toward civic-minded journalism in the eighties, was but one aspect of a more widespread professionalization of intellectuals and writers in Mexico. Today there is the intellectual that goes the academic route, or there is the intellectual that goes the route of the market, the state playing a subordinate subsidizing role in both cases.

Inspiring the Human Spirit

In May 2005 an essay by George Steiner appeared in *El Universal* in Mexico City. In it he is arguing for the French to vote for the passage of the European constitution. His points resonated in Mexico at the time, because of his understanding laws, treaties, and official institutions do not of themselves inspire the human spirit. He laments that today “scientific institutes, libraries, concert halls and theaters barely survive in a Europe that is fundamentally prosperous...” Economic prosperity does not automatically translate into support for the sciences and the arts. But worse yet, for Steiner, given the deepening spiritual void, Europeans are being seized by that pernicious consumerism and commercially organized star-system mindedness that is so characteristic of many Americans. He is appalled that in a recent survey English youngsters expressed their preference for the soccer star David Beckham, over the playwright William Shakespeare, as a national treasure.³⁶¹

What Steiner does not see, however, is that already he inhabits only a niche. Would all Europeans’ today really spend whole afternoons discussing philosophy, politics, and literature in cafés, walk across mountains and valleys to get from one town to another, carry the classics with them, maintain an internal conversation with the greats, feel themselves weighed down by history, torn by their allegiance to Athens and Jerusalem, and project their own demise? As the young English he deplores, he chooses literary greats by which to orient his life. No matter how much we might like to deplore their lack of taste, that the young English should choose athletes and mass media personalities while Steiner a pantheon of authors, is but a matter of names, one set instead of another. Of course Steiner can muster all the distinction that his knowledge of books gives him in order to look down upon the young English, but they too would surely dismiss him as stuffy, irrelevant, and disconnected from the contemporary world. The life of the intellectual has always been an elite mode of existence, what has changed is that today less and less people truly expect the whole of a population to become lovers of Shakespeare, Moliere, or Cervantes. Nations are not being constructed around bodies of fiction, certainly not in Mexico.

³⁶⁰Ibid., 429-36.

³⁶¹Steiner, “Una idea de Europa.”

Markets expand and diversify, no less markets of goods and services as markets in group belonging. If once upon a time the Mexican state was intent on selling its citizens a package of ideological goods including a unitary myth instrumental not only in garnering legitimacy for its exercise of power but serving toward satisfying social and psychological needs for belonging, today there is a selection of solutions available among which one can choose.

So, you were not happy with a one-party State? Now you can choose between the candidates from three political parties, one conveniently left of center, one center, and one to the right. So, the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, thoroughly implanted in Mexico with the zeal of the Counter Reformation, was no longer satisfying your spiritual needs? Now you have available to you a variety of options, from charismatic or more liberal minded Catholic groups to Pentecostal or Jehova's Witness congregations. So, the official integrationist doctrine of *mestizaje* no longer has much of a pull on autonomous minded Native Americans, or is capable of discursively glossing over racial and ethnic differences, then how about pluriethnicity or multiculturalism?

As far as employment, are you having difficulty getting by or getting what you want with your income? With a little courage you can always go north following so many of your compatriots, or tap into the lucrative business of growing, transporting, and selling narcotics, stealing cars, armed robbery, or kidnapping for ransom. If only you had but just a little more disposable cash, you could be happier. Entertainment is there for the purchasing. Do you like reading? You can get literature from anywhere, in bookstores, or even at more accessible prices on the street. Do you like music, more groups from everywhere give concerts in Mexico City than ever before. You can buy albums or compilations of any genre of music for a dollar or so as you walk to work or ride in the subway; and if you like movies, there are yearly film festivals. Art films don't do it for you? There is always television, cable, satellite, hundreds of channels, DVDs, and your local movie theater with all the latest Hollywood blockbusters.

Over the past fifteen years there has been a virtual star burst of options, choices, and services in Mexico City. Never before has there been such a wide variety of restaurants, entertainment, retail outlets, and commodities as there are today. To take advantage of it all, one only needs to get their hands on a little cash or credit. The demise of the PRI has heralded in a period of more competitive and transparent elections. Will this transformation in Mexico bring along with it a more robust civic life, or just more market-driven initiatives? *Nexos* still exists, and it competes roughly for the same market share as *Letras Libres*, the sequel to Paz's *Vuelta*. Their niche is highly educated and critical minded readers. For other demographics there are other magazine.

Vignette: Gabriella and Rubén, Two Writers

This vignette gives yet another sketch of writers and their web of relationships. By including it, I not only want to contribute to a clearer idea of the group that I worked with, but even more present the problem of access to knowledge. The knowledge that a writer gains and employs in their texts are gained through social practices. It is to some of these social practices that I turn to here.

It took me a few seconds to figure out where the entrance to Gabriella's apartment is. It is the first time that I actually go inside. Before she had told me she did not want to invite me in because Rubén was staying with her and the place was a mess. Last night the apartment was spotless. I was immediately attracted to the colorful tile in the entryway and hallway, and the old wood floors in the other rooms. She too had liked the floors; it was what made her decide to take the place although it was in a terrible condition. The wood floors had been painted white as if by pouring pails full of paint onto them, she told me. The windows were broken, and the place had had the "bad energy" left behind by a depressive alcoholic woman.

Gabriella was very excited to share with me some grappa that a Spanish friend of hers had recently brought to her from Europe. During the time that Rubén had been with her, she had hid it, because "he would have finished the bottle in one night." The grappa was artisanal and comes from a very small Italian village. Italy came up repeatedly in our conversation throughout the evening, mostly because Gabriella some years ago spent some time at Benetton's communications research center called Fabrica. At that time, the director was Oliviero Toscani, the provocative photographer and "terrorist of the image."

Once she went to Thailand to visit three "gorgeous" European men that she knew from Fabrica. They are adventurous, well traveled, and laid back, attractive and desirable to Gabriella and her friend in every way. What was surprising for Gabriella was to find that they, the three of them, were all married to Thai women. The night they visited these men the wives cooked dinner, waited on them, and once the meal was over absented themselves to an adjacent room to watch dubbed Mexican soap operas, leaving their husbands to socialize freely with Gabriella and her friend. As Gabriella told me, the husbands spoke very poor Thai and their wives very poor English. Implicit in Gabriella and her friend's surprise is the belief that men like these should prefer women like them, Western cosmopolitans, women with whom they could at least have "interesting" conversations.

The times that Gabriella and I have met, just the two of us, we have spent a lot of time talking about her relationship to a man I know, who is married. Gabriella thinks that if she was truly "sophisticated" she would have been better able to handle a relationship with a married man better than she did. What bothers her is that she fell so hard for this man, that she allowed herself to be fooled so easily no matter how "clichéd and predictable" the relationship turned out to be.

She also told me about her "divorce" with Rubén. Rubén was to leave to Spain but got thrown off the British Airways' flight for being drunk. He had ingested two forty ounce bottles of beer at Gabriella's apartment before leaving for the airport. Gabriella is sure that if it had of been someone else, everything would have been just fine. When the officers came onto the plane to

escort him off, he was already sleeping in his seat. Gabriella found out about the incident because Trisha Ziff called her from her cell phone from the plane. What a coincidence that both of them were on the same flight! Trisha was going to Britain to visit a friend of hers who is dying. For Gabriella this coincidence is nothing other than a sign of “cosmic synchrony”. Another is that Rubén should have gone to visit a friend in Ajusco that lives in a house that used to belong to Gabriella’s father on a street called Happiness. Rubén even writes about this house in a book.³⁶² “What are the chances of this happening?” she asked me. However, just as Gabriella thinks that cosmic synchrony brings her wonderful things; it brings terrible things to Rubén.

Gabriella loves Rubén, but as she told me, they have never had sex. She feels that she could not have sex with him because he is a womanizer and much too wild. But she likes having him around. He spent this past month with her in her apartment. He helps satisfy her voyeuristic tendencies, as she puts it. Rubén told her once that she could not be normal since she got along with him so well. One day, in the middle of the day, Rubén ran out of Gabriella’s apartment building and crashed into the cars parked out in front, fell onto his back, looked up into the sky, and started laughing. Gabriella watched the whole scene from her living room window. She loves this freedom in Rubén, his spontaneity. “It is really nothing all that spectacular, but it is wonderful all the same.” Once they stayed up until four in the morning and Rubén acted out move by move how it would be to have sex with Rogelio. Gabriella has a loud boisterous laugh and she could not contain herself, even though it was so early in the morning.

Some days later her property owner spoke to her about a “crazy” person that Gabriella had staying with her. “Is he safe?” She made up some story about knowing Rubén since they were children. The neighbors were apparently worried and had spoken to the property owner. All of this proves to Gabriella how Rubén, perhaps his freedom, makes people nervous, scares them. According to Trisha, he tripped when he stepped out of the shuttle that transported them to the airplane. That was what tipped them off about Rubén’s inebriation and led them to deny him his flight. If someone else had tripped, would they have done the same?

Since Trisha had called her, Gabriella began to worry when Rubén did not show up to her apartment even after several hours. Where was he? She called one of his friends and he called others. She imagined that he might have gone to a bar in the airport and gotten himself really plastered. She imagined him with all of his belongings, eight bundles, sitting on the curb drunk or passed out. She really disliked the fact that she transformed herself that night into this thirty-eight year old man’s mother. Ruben, as it turns out, had decided to stay in the airport until the next day thinking that there would be a flight for him to take. As it turns out British Airways does not fly out of Mexico City everyday. Furthermore, he would have to be put on standby because the flights were overbooked due to the Holy Week holiday. He decided, since he had some work to do with Laboratorio Alameda, to postpone his trip until after the vacation. After their goodbyes, after her worrying all night about him, Gabriella kindly asked him, once he finally communicated with her, if he could stay somewhere else instead of coming back to her place where he had been staying since he got kicked out of his rooftop room in the Roma. That was what Gabriella called their divorce.

Gabriella and I get along quite well, because we both like to figure other people out, and derive

³⁶²Bares et al., *Me ves y sufres*.

perhaps a voyeuristic pleasure out of knowing, talking, and thinking about the intimate details of the lives of those who belong to the group of friends and colleagues we belong to. She credits me with coming up with the idea that we are part of an incestuous family, exchanging amongst ourselves friends and lovers. It is truly amazing how even before meeting we already knew about each other and who each other's acquaintances were. You would never know that we were in the largest city in the Americas, since we circle around in a group that cannot number much more than a couple hundred people.

She has talked about the married man that she was involved with as being an interesting subject that merited some writing about. Last night, however, she admitted that her "objectivity" is compromised with respect to him, and that she would not be able to do it. Rubén, on the other hand, seems to be a perfect case for her curiosity and study, as well as object of her care and affection. She is certain that things would never work out between the two of them, but perhaps because of this, he inspires so much tenderness in her.

"He is a real sweetie!" What scares others about him, makes him that much more lovable for Gabriella. As she tells me, he spoils and takes care of her too. He cooks for her, and has inspired her to start cooking too. He got Rogelio to pay him for an article that he wrote for *Replicante* just so that he could pay her past-due phone bill. As luck would have it, though, the next month became immediately due and so the phone line was never put back into service. As Gabriella tells me, she has not paid her rent for this month either. Rubén apparently worries about her being thrown out onto the street. Of course, he has been thrown out himself innumerable times, but he cannot tolerate the thought of the same thing happening to Gabriella.

I personally have seen the regard that Rubén has for Gabriella and her family. Once when Rogelio, Ari, Andrés, Rubén, and I were eating at the Uruguayan restaurant Don Asado, Gabriella came by our table to chat with us. She had come to the restaurant with her parents, who, as she told us, have begun going out and eating together, going on what can only be considered as dates even though they are now divorced. It seemed that this time she was the excuse for them to get together, but she had decided to give them some time to be alone just the two of them at the end of their meal. They were eating downstairs and we were upstairs. But when they left, and as they waited for the valet to bring them their car, we all leaned out of the window to check out Gabriella's mother who somebody had said, "given her age," was very good looking.

As she climbed into the car, Rogelio shouted out some libidinous comment that I no longer remember. Rubén immediately reprimanded him. It was Gabriella's mother after all, damn it! We all had a big laugh and gave Rubén a hard time because of his outburst. Here was Rubén, a man that once dropped his pants, mooned the hostess of a party, lighting his butt hair on fire, Rubén a man who will almost invariably dangle his dick in front of women around him, whether in public or private, once he has reached a certain level of inebriation, Rubén who I have seen repeatedly go up to women and tell them that they should "fuck", or "get married" in a tone no less sexual. This Rubén surprised us all that day by telling Rogelio to "respect" Gabriella's mother.

Gabriella, of course, loves this story of Rubén defending her mother. Nevertheless, she is not the only one to recognize Rubén's "heart of gold." Ari, when I first met Rubén, told me about it too. At that time, Ari, in the throws of gaining sobriety, was cutting off his relationship with all of his

former drinking buddies, but in the case of Rubén, he obviously was willing to make an exception. “He is the noblest person that I know. He is very crazy, but underneath it all he is loyal.”

Once I told Ari how Rubén’s had been hit in the leg by a Grand Marquis while crossing a street. The driver had offered to pay Rubén money for the injury, but Rubén refused. When Rubén told me the story, I told him that he should have taken the money the man offered. After all, he has a hard time making ends meet. Rubén would not listen to me. He told me that he has his “principles.” Ari agreed with him. “Rubén did what was right.” Of course, this was all before the day that Rubén kicked Ari’s little brother in the face at the Bull Pen, the small dive on the other side of Insurgentes where some writers like to go slumming. Now Ari will have nothing to do with Rubén. He says that Rubén has it coming. He has stepped on too many people’s toes. They have not seen or talked to each other in over two months.

Last time that we went to go have a coffee, Gabriella told me about how sad losing Ari’s friendship has made Rubén. What made things worse for him is that he does not remember anything. It all happened the night that we got together at the Black Horse with Rogelio, the night before he moved to Guadalajara. The next day he came by to say goodbye to Rogelio, still drunk and with blood coming out of a large gash on the side of his head. As they told me, the story Ari’s brothers beat up Rubén and kicked him while he lay on the ground. Rogelio was with his mother at the moment and did not want to let Rubén inside of his apartment like that. Rogelio asked him what had happened, but he was not able to tell him. According to Gabriella, he still does not remember. Later somebody told him to keep low, because Ari and his oldest brother said they wanted to “kill” him, or at least get him thrown out of the country. Their anger has died down since then, but I know enough not to bring up the topic of Rubén with Ari.

I told Gabriella, that what Rubén did that turned everyone against him was that he kicked Ari’s youngest brother in the face. He is a peace and nature loving young man that can do no wrong. As far as everyone is concerned, there is no possible way that Ari’s youngest brother would have done something to deserve to have his nose bloodied. If Rubén had of kicked Ari’s oldest brother in the face, on the other hand, nobody would have defended him. Ari’s oldest brother, as everyone knows, can be a real jerk when he drinks, and always gets into fights, the last time at the bar La Pata Negra. In the case of Ari’s oldest brother, everyone is certain that he provoked and deserved to be beaten, but Ari’s youngest brother is a saint. Gabriella passed all of this information on to Rubén. We both felt that maybe it would help him come to terms with why Ari no longer wants to see him.

Gabriella told me what happened in the Centro de la Imagen at Trisha’s exhibition on the image of Che Guevara. Rogelio came from Guadalajara to be at the opening since he wrote the introduction to the catalog. Rubén was also there and enjoyed seeing Rogelio who he adores, “worships” is the word that Gabriella used. Later Rogelio was meeting with all of his friends in a bar in the Condesa since he was only in town for one night. I was in Torreón then, at the Writers Conference. What hurt Rubén the most, was that he was not invited to go to the bar because Ari was going to be there. So that is what Rubén is like, a wild maniac that once got thrown into jail for breaking the window to an ambulance, sexually harasses women, uninhibited and crude, and at other times extremely sensitive, noble, and faithful to those that he loves, depressed because his few friends have now abandoned him.

Last night Gabriella told me that Rubén knows that the life he lives is self-destructive. Ari told me once that he thought that Rubén had a fear of getting old and was trying to kill himself before he got there. Rubén, according to Gabriella, feels that if he were to give up his free and reckless life, he would no longer be able to write. He has to experience things, he thinks, in order to be able to write about them. Gabriella, on the other hand, feels that as a voyeur she can live and write through other people's experiences and does not need to necessarily experience them in her own flesh. The anthropologist in me thought that he did a little of both.

Chapter VIII: Sporting Nationalism

There is perhaps no better way of demonstrating the fate of nationalist sentiment in Mexico than by tracing how it is grafted onto a devotion for the national soccer squad. So many Mexicans implicate themselves in international soccer tournaments precisely “because civic mindedness has atrophied, and patriotism now has very few opportunities for existence.”³⁶³ Like those who celebrated the boom in the international popularity of Latin American literature during the latter half of the twentieth century, there were those who believed that sports was an area in which historical and economic discrepancies could be erased or compensated for.

Sports and Inferiority

Salvador Novo, for one, saw in sports a way for Mexicans to release themselves from whatever sense that they might have of inferiority. In the walking tour that he chronicles, he took his “friend to visit two or three examples of sport centers with which the Federal District’s government attends to the healthy diversion and physical education of proletarian youth.” He mentions one in particular: “The trees have grown since I saw it planned, constructed, and inaugurated in 1929 or 1930. New generations, agile, sure of themselves, dark and clean, free from all complexes of inferiority, play in its courts,” swim in its pools, “shout and applaud a good basket in its gymnasium or an unexpected hold in the wrestling rink that helps temper their muscles.” A similar uplifting scene is repeated in other centers “where girls, redeemed from the servitude of the factory, enjoy and share their joy with their class and workmates, new Eves and Adams of a new and autonomous destiny.”³⁶⁴

But as with Novo’s optimism with respect to the Mexican “miracle” of economic development, his optimism with regard to the redeeming qualities of athletic sports, as we begin the twenty-first-century, proves to be largely unwarranted. As in the world of commerce, there is today a large and elaborate hierarchy in which most proletarian youth and Mexicans find themselves far from the top. Perhaps only at a very young age can Mexican children believe that they are capable of anything, including having the ability to become celebrated athletes. But very quickly they must adapt themselves to the reality that on their street, school and beyond, there are those who will block their climb. Of course, some do climb and make it to the top, but how many Mexican athletes have really left their mark on the stage of international sports?

Mexico has made it as far as the quarter finals in the World Cup only twice, both times when Mexico hosted the event. Why is Mexico one of only five countries to have hosted two World Cup competitions when unlike Italy, France, Brazil, and Germany, the other countries to have done the same, the Mexican national team has never even made it to the semi-finals?³⁶⁵ In the 1998 match against Germany, the Mexicans were playing strong and appeared to be in a good

363Monsiváis, *Los rituales del caos*, 33.

364Novo and Monsiváis, *Nueva grandeza mexicana*, 80.

365 For the pessimists, Mexico’s evident privilege in the world of soccer, as can be appreciated not only by the fact that Mexico has hosted two World Cups but also in that it consistently ranks high among national squads even though it performs poorly, is evidence that the promoters of the national team are involved in the same shenanigans within the FIFA as soccer teams owners are within the Mexican league. For World Cup information consult the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Internet site: <http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/archive/index.html>.

position to eliminate the Germans and go on to the quarter finals, even on European soil.³⁶⁶ At minute forty-seven, Luis Hernández scored the first goal of the match. Hernández, or The Killer as he is nicknamed, with his long flowing blond hair, was then the pride and joy of Mexican soccer, the leading scorer in that year's World Cup. For twenty-eight glorious minutes Mexico was beating Germany. Then, with only fifteen minutes left in the game, Juergen Klinsmann scored a tying goal, and eleven minutes later he was followed by Oliver Bierhoff who won the game for Germany, dashing Mexico's hopes in that competition.

The Mexican announcers had been ecstatic. Early on in the game they said that both squads were demonstrating a respect for the other. That the historically superior German side should show "respect" for the Mexicans was itself evidence of the Mexican side's potential. Then, as the players warmed up and settled into the game, the announcers said that the play was falling into a healthy "*tu a tu*." The importance of the phrase can be appreciated by knowing that subordinates in Mexico when speaking with superiors will make use of the formal pronoun *usted* instead of the informal *tu*, and otherwise inflect their speech in a way that marks the social distinction. To play against Germans "*tu a tu*" implied that Mexican players had transcended their sense of inferiority with respect to the Germans and had assumed the appropriate attitude necessary for winning, for being winners. But like the expectations fed by the mid-century boom in the international popularity for Mexican letters, the expectations pinned on the Mexican national soccer squad have been largely frustrated.

Nineteen seventy-eight was a particularly low moment for Mexican soccer. Mexico not only was unable to win a single World Cup match, losing to Tunisia, West Germany, and Poland, but it lost to the Germans by the exceedingly disgraceful score of six goals to zero. "We lost so badly," says Juan Gustavo Lepe, the protagonist in the short account by Monsiváis, "that even the national seal appeared to erase itself... There are moments in life in which misfortune impels us to self-flagellation, this is the reason that the guillotine-phrases exist: 'the vision of the vanquished,' 'the inferiority complex of the Mexican,' 'the hole of underdevelopment,' 'the pain of not having been and the terror of never being'."³⁶⁷ Furthermore, as if the humiliation was not enough, Mexico did not even qualify for the next World Cup, eliminated in pre-tournament competition by the notoriously weak Salvadoran side.

Although Mexico has never won the World Cup, or Copa América championship, the national squad does win some soccer matches.³⁶⁸ It might have been the victory over the Republic of Ireland in pre-knockout round play of the 1994 World Cup that Juan Gustavo was going to celebrate at the Angel of Independence, the monument in Mexico City where all of Mexico's

366 For those who are not aware of the influence of home-soil-advantage in international soccer matches it should be mentioned that a team from the Americas has only once been able to win a World Cup on European soil. Brazil won the 1958 World Cup in Sweden against Sweden. No European team has ever won a World Cup on American soil.

367 Monsiváis, *Los rituales del caos*, 34.

368 The Mexican national men's team has won seven CONCACAF titles. The CONCACAF is made up of teams from North America and the Caribbean, all of which historically have performed poorly in World Cup matches. The Mexican squad is usually invited to participate in the much more prestigious Copa América tournament, consisting of South American sides, including the repeat World Cup title holders Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. The team's best performances in Copa América were in 1993 and 2001 when they made it all the way to the final against Argentina and Columbia, respectively.

soccer victories are celebrated.³⁶⁹ As Juan Gustavo, in Monsiváis' account, made his way to the Angel of Independence along with throngs of others, unsettling questions came into his mind: "Is soccer the cathartic hallucination that facilitates the release of all the frustrations and resentments of so many crushed lives?"

It is very important for Mexicans that their side should prevail, particularly against their bitter regional rival, the United States.³⁷⁰ Oh, to be so forsaken by good fortune and yet to be so close to the United States!³⁷¹ Mexicans still smart because the United States seized more than half of their territory during the nineteenth century. Because of a corrupt and cowardly leadership, the Mexican army was not even able to capitalize on its overwhelming strengths. Did Mexico's historic military failure foreshadow the country's contemporary performance in international soccer competitions? The present, it may seem, only telescopes out of the tragedies of the past. A country that cares little about soccer, the United States, has now begun to consistently beat Mexico in a sport that is for Mexicans a matter of great pride.

The Curse of Malinche

After so many centuries of loss—how many times have Mexicans been conquered, humiliated, and defeated?—people "take advantage of any opportunity to reconstruct their ego."³⁷² You can see these people congregating at the Angel of Independence after any international soccer victory. They will yell, dance on top of trucks and buses, lean out of car windows, run out into moving traffic, and like fans at a rock concert dive off the monument into the masses. The intense emotion on their faces is much more than simple joy. They scream as they do at Independence Day celebrations: "*Viva México, hijos de la chingada!*" And as a character in D.H. Lawrence's *Plumed Serpent* remarked: "Whenever a Mexican shouts '*Viva!*' he ends by yelling '*Muera!*' When he says 'Long live...!' in reality he means 'Death to this or that man!'"³⁷³ Soccer celebrations, as with all events where national symbols are still deployed, are rituals with profound psychological import.

The vulgar slogan "*Viva México, hijos de la chingada*" is highly ambiguous and difficult to define, let alone translate. Paz dedicated an entire chapter of his classic national character study to elucidating its meaning. "All the distressing tension" of being Mexican is expressed in this phrase. It "comes to our mouths when rage, joy or enthusiasm drives us to exalt our condition as Mexicans... An authentic battle cry, charged with a particular electricity, this phrase is a challenge and affirmation, a shot, directed at an imaginary enemy, and an explosion in the air." Mexicans repeat the cry to affirm themselves against others. And "who are the others? The others are '*hijos de la chingada*,'" that is, sons of La Chingada. And who is La Chingada? "First and foremost," she is Mother, Maternity, the all-suffering Mexican ideal of woman. To *chingar* is to effect violence by going out "of oneself... to penetrate by force in another." In colloquial terms *chingar* is roughly equivalent to the English verb fuck. Whoever effects this action, however,

369 This is what I surmise from the fact that Monsiváis' essay was first published in 1995. But of course Monsiváis' protagonist could have been celebrating any international soccer victory occurring before that year.

370Ibid., 33-4.

371 This is my adaptation of the popular phrase, attributed to President Porfirio Díaz, "*Pobre México, tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos.*"

372Ibid., 34.

373Cited in Verissimo, *Mexico*, 244.

“never does it with the consent of the one” upon whom violence is served. It is an ideally masculine undertaking, in the Mexican imaginary, active and cruel, one that “provokes a bitter, resentful satisfaction in he who executes it.”³⁷⁴

By contrast, *la chingada* is feminine, passive and defenseless. “For the Mexican,” explains Paz, “life is the possibility to *chingar* or to be *chingado*. That is, to humiliate, punish and offend. Or the inverse.”³⁷⁵ In such a contest, the only strategy for success is to make oneself hermetic, impervious to others while at the same time violently thrusting oneself forward onto the world. In this lies a man’s honor and pleasure, to do *chingaderas*, “unexpected acts that produce confusion, horror, destruction.”³⁷⁶ *Chingaderas* are the surprising and senseless acts of violence, the assassination of the presidential candidate by Mario in Yépez’s novel, or that effected by the Dingos in Servín’s.³⁷⁷ Paz himself mentions the urban legend of a man who shoots his friend in the head as a response to his friend’s headache.³⁷⁸ The Mexican man, according to Paz, while remaining closed, tears the world and others apart.

Moreover, in tearing, the Mexican masculine archetype is provoked into “a great sinister laughter.”³⁷⁹ Behind Mario’s smile, does he laugh to himself because in perforating Colosio’s skull he was able to tear open the Mexican political system? Mexicans say “*no te rajes*” as a warning not to back down. *Rajar*, literally, is to split open. “What is important,” counsels the tutor to Servín’s protagonist, is to “*rajarse la madre*.” This literally means to “rip open the mother.” Figuratively, it means to fuck everyone over “at the first opportunity because it brings you respect and something about which to talk about.”³⁸⁰ Male humor is an act of vengeance. The real male is strong, a joker, and closed: “Real men laugh at women, but never with them.” To be open, for these Mexicans, is to be passive and feminine: “That is the good thing about not being a woman: it lowers one’s chances of being raped.”³⁸¹

Hijos de la chingada, then, could be roughly translated as “sons of a rape victim.” If the victorious person is the one who is able to impose himself violently on another, then what greater insult than to refer to another as the illegitimate child of a person who was not able to stave off her aggressor. However, the true ambiguity of the phrase arises because Mexicans consider themselves sons and daughters of La Chingada. In the national myth it is Malintzin, also known as Malinche, the indigenous mistress, advisor, and interpreter for the Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortez, the mother to the first mestizos, who saves Cortez’s life and is blamed for the Spanish Conquest, for opening up herself and Mexico to foreign domination. To call someone a *malinchista* is to accuse him of a treasonous fondness for foreigners. And oh, how prevalent this fondness is among Mexicans. Doesn’t everyone find Mexicans to be friendly? Isn’t Mexico the big Amigo Nation?

In the 1970s the politically engaged singer and composer Gabino Palomares wrote a ballad that was made popular by, among others, Amparo Ochoa. After narrating the Conquest, the ballad

374Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*, 82-5.

375Ibid., 86.

376Ibid., 89-90.

377Yépez, *A.B.U.R.T.O*; Servín, *Al final del vacío*.

378Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*, 89.

379Ibid., 90.

380Servín, *Al final del vacío*, 278.

381Ibid., 100, 110.

continues:

And we were left with the curse of offering to foreigners / Our faith, our culture,
our bread, our money / And we continue to exchange gold for accounts of glass /
And we give our riches for mirrors that glisten.

Today, in the twentieth century, blonds keep on arriving / And we open up our
homes and call them friends / But if an Indian arrives, tired from traversing the
mountain / We humiliate him and we see him as a stranger in his own land.

You are a hypocrite humbling yourself before foreigners / But becoming arrogant
with your brothers from your own nation / Oh, the curse of Malinche, sickness of
the present / When will you leave my land, when will you let my people free?³⁸²

There is a reasoning, as expressed in this song, by which Mexicans often conclude that the best way to address their country's problems is by closing themselves off from foreign intrusions, protecting themselves from the exterior.

For Paz, the ambiguity of the phrase "*hijos de la chingada*" is an ambiguity at the very heart of Mexican identity. It is also the ambiguity that allows Paz to develop his more universal understanding of the Mexican condition. In as much as the Chingada is also the void, many Mexicans are like others in the contemporary world in that they find themselves on the brink. But to define life, as some Mexicans apparently have, as doing harm unto others before harm is done unto them, is unnecessarily detrimental. Mexico has always been open to foreigners, according to Paz. The richness of its history comes from the confluence of multiple currents. Mexicans, in striving to close themselves off from threatening impositions cut themselves off from what is best about themselves. Paz's solution is to free openness from its association with subjection. The cosmopolitanism that he celebrated was intended to be an inclusive one.

A Violent Outburst

Juan Gustavo, in Monsiváis' chronicle, grew more and more disgusted with the celebration of the national soccer victory. The rabble around him boasted of its machismo and eagerness to possess. They had given "themselves over to groping, and to feeling up, and to ripping dresses open. What horror! What is happening here at just a few paces is an intent at tumultuous rape." Young male revelers "trap a young woman, they strip her from the waist up, and they attack her with the zeal of cannibals. So many hands on a pair of breasts!... the girl screams, struggles, from one second to the next she goes from distraction to fear, she wants to flee, at first nobody helps her, there is too much confusion, but later some people react, they protect her or want to, and in the end the girl is saved by the excess: there are too many hands, too many arousals."³⁸³

There is another group that every three minutes yells out to the crowd: "What are Mexicans?" And the only admissible answer, clear and resounding: '*Unos chigones!!*' And again: 'What is everyone else?' And *everyone else* is and can fulfill a specific function: '*CULEE-ROS/CU-LEEE-ROS*'.³⁸⁴ As can be deduced from what we have already seen, *chingones* are those who

382Ochoa, *Cancionero Popular Mexicano*.

383Monsiváis, *Los rituales del caos*, 36.

384Ibid.

serve violence on others, and it should not come as a surprise that correspondingly *culeros* are asses, assholes, those fixated on them; they are effeminate and worthless persons who allow themselves to be penetrated and dominated. If we believe Ramos and Paz, these cries are not only evidence that these Mexicans believe themselves to be strong and dominant and others to be dominated and weak, but even more fundamentally, the inverse.

Bad Management of Raw Materials

In 2005 a Mexican side won the U-17 World Cup tournament against three time-champion Brazil. This is to date Mexico's biggest victory in international soccer. The U-17 World Cup is a soccer tournament for national sides of male players 17 years old and younger. Given the disappointing performance of the adult team, the spectacular performance of the adolescent team was a welcome surprise to Mexican fans. According to the FIFA website, in the semi-finals of the tournament "the Mexicans literally [sic] tore apart the Dutch, scoring four times (4-0) and completely dominating the encounter." And in the final: "The young Mexicans were anything but intimidated" by Brazil. "Superior in speed, technique and efficiency, they breached the reigning world champions' rearguard three times for no reply."³⁸⁵

What was amazing for many Mexicans was that the adolescent players did not compete as their older colleagues, that is as men weighed down by a sense of inferiority. The report testifies to this by its use of the words "tore apart" and "breached." By any criterion, Mexican fans had every reason to be proud, except, of course, for the purest of nationalists, those unsettled by the fact that the "'baby' of the team" around which the whole Mexican "system" was built was Giovanni Dos Santos, son of a Brazilian soccer player who had made his career in Mexico. Dos Santos had been the master play-maker in the tournament, assisting on fully half of the goals scored. The FIFA website, as did many Mexicans, attributed Dos Santos' abilities, his "remarkable vision and stunning technique," to his Brazilian "roots."³⁸⁶

For being a country with a relatively well-funded soccer league, where most boys play soccer from a young age, why does Mexico perform so poorly in international soccer matches?³⁸⁷ The morning after the U-17 World Cup victory a taxicab driver gave me this answer:

It is the Mexican soccer league, that is the problem. It is governed in the interest of money and not the level of play.... The performance of the boys last night proved that Mexico has the raw material to produce good soccer players. What happens is that all this good material is wasted in the [domestic Mexican] League. Owners manage their teams in order to please fans and television audiences.... Do you know that a boy's parents have to pay for him to go to soccer camp and to try out for a team? They should have a system to search for boys with talent, and pay for them to get trained... [Team Owners] will even take a player from one team and move him to another just to get the ratings [on television]... Mexican players should leave

³⁸⁵Fifa.com, "Mexico reign supreme."

³⁸⁶Ibid.

³⁸⁷Salaries for soccer players in Mexico, dollar for dollar, are a whole order of magnitude greater than they are in the United States, a country with over three times its GDP per capita. And even though salaries can be greater in the European league, Mexicans who choose to play in Europe usually do so by agreeing to be paid significantly less than they would be in Mexico.

Mexico and play in Europe. They should learn to play soccer by playing against the best in the world. When Rafael Márquez comes back from Barcelona to play for the national team he is not intimidated when they play against Brazil and Argentina because he has already been playing with those players in Europe.

The taxicab driver pushed his point home by suggesting that the best thing would be for the stars of the 2005 U-17 side to go directly to Europe, skipping the Mexican soccer league altogether. In fact, at the time, Dos Santos was already playing in the Spanish Juvenile A Category with the Catalan squad FC Barcelona. Moreover, a little over a month later, the tournament's leading scorer, Carlos Vela, was signed up by Arsenal FC in England.

The taxicab driver, in his dissection of the Mexican problem with soccer, was appropriating an old nationalist trope. According to Bartra, Mexicans have always had to reflect on the "tight limits to Mexican isolation... This is our original hell: that of backwardness, underdevelopment, and dependence."³⁸⁸ The Mafia, as I describe in Chapter VI, by what Piazza called their "silent and quiet labor," was able to change Mexico from a country that only imported literature to one that exported a newly valorized international product.³⁸⁹ To go from cultural importer to exporter was the result of a successful strategy, akin to the economic import-substitution industrialization strategy that made possible the mid-century Mexican Miracle of economic development. In this case, cultural products from Europe and the United States were replaced by Mexican ones, officially protected and fomented. Such a design was based on the "conviction that Mexico has, from ancestral times, unlimited riches and spiritual resources that needed to be revitalized, refined, exploited and even exported to the metropolis in order to demonstrate that thirty centuries of history have not been lived in vain."³⁹⁰

Both the euphoria that Piazza cites around the recognition of Mexican authors by critics in Paris, London, Madrid, and New York, and the excitement of Mexicans with the U-17 World Cup victory, is rooted in the "essentialist creed."³⁹¹ Due in no small part to the work of anthropologists, beginning notably with Franz Boas' student Manuel Gamio, first intellectuals in Mexico, and now soccer coaches too, have seen their role as that of "exploiting natural resources," even national abilities and knowledge.³⁹² Moreover, all discussions tend "to center on the procedures to extract, process and distribute the *essential* wealth, that can be considered either as a renewable or nonrenewable."³⁹³

These ideas became prominent in Mexico during the series of technocratic administrations stretching from 1982 to the present. If at the beginning of the century the emphasis was on integrating disparate elements into a national collectivity, then today concern about the limits that Mexicans face are expressed increasingly in terms of individual instances of managerial and personal performance. Mexico is a rich country, and Mexicans can be winners, the problem has been with an authoritarian regime, bad management, corruption, and personal faults as well as

388Bartra, *Anatomía del mexicano*, 11.

389Piazza, *La Mafia*, 123.

390Bartra, *Anatomía del mexicano*, 11.

391Ibid., 12.

392For an introduction to the importance of Manuel Gamio in the construction of official national discourse, see

Brading, "Apéndice I: Manuel Gamio y el indigenismo oficial en México."

393Bartra, *Anatomía del mexicano*, 12.

lack of focus and effort.

For Paz, the problem of Mexican identity not only resided in the history of Mexico, but in the failure of developmentalism, an authoritarian regime, and what he called the Mexican predilection for hopelessly opposing imaginary enemies, then Bartra and other intellectuals today push forward this logic by arguing that the problems of Mexico and Mexicans can only be appropriately addressed through a democratic aperture and by strengthening democratic institutions and civic mindedness.

The Individualization of Inferiority

The so-called transition to democracy in Mexico was consolidated in July 2000 with the election of Vicente Fox Quesada, the first president in over seventy years who did not belong to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Many of those who voted “for change” associated the removal of the PRI from the presidency with doing away with the clientelism, nepotism, and corruption that has been associated with this party and the Mexican one-party revolutionary state. While Ramos could blame the inferiority of Mexicans on their membership in a peculiar nation, by the mid-twentieth century Paz found that he had to go beyond the nation to place the emphasis on the global situation. Today, blame accumulates around two poles: one occupied by the most powerful, often governments, transnational capital, and the market; and the other occupied by common individuals. The nation and other intermediate collectivities are left out in this arrangement. As with Piccatto’s argument about crime in Chapter III, many Mexicans feel that the forces that impinge on their lives have slipped out of their control, even when it concerns local officials, commerce, and their country’s government.

After the earthquake of 1985, social analysts were heartened by the sprouting up of what was called “civil society,” hundreds of self-help, nonofficial, intermediary political and economic organizations. The 1980s, as we shall see in the case of journalism, was an important decade for the “empowerment” of citizens. However, even when united in an impressive block, as when supporting the left-of-center 2006 presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, civic organizations have had to face their own impotence. It is a sign of the times that so many supporters of López Obrador had to draw on that old explanation, election fraud, in order to account for the candidate's loss in what were the cleanest and fairest presidential elections to date. How are you to distribute blame when despite all your hard work you have failed to bring change? If you are a disenfranchised Mexican you might either blame the always-partly-occult and invisible workings of powerful entities, or you can blame yourself and other individuals. Whether you place blame more on powerful impersonal interests or on individuals is often enough to determine today whether you are politically left or right of center.

Therapy Can Cure Mexicanness

This polar dynamic in distributing responsibility can also be seen clearly in the case of national soccer. In Monsiváis’ chronicle, Juan Gustavo says to himself: “Soccer is a science... it is the empirical verification of the correct ways of using a ball that secures the victory of one nation over the rest.” In connecting “science” and “nation”, this quote contains within it two distinct but related axioms: 1) International soccer tournaments are a stage upon which nations compete and

prove their value, and 2) Soccer victories can be engineered through appropriate training, coaching, and followthrough. It is with respect to the first line of reasoning that Mexicans come to feel personally implicated by their team's performance in international soccer matches, and it is with respect to the second that individuals, coaches and players often carry on their shoulders the responsibility for their team's victory or loss.

It used to be that Mexicans could feel a certain national superiority to the United States because they consistently beat them in soccer. Since 1999, however, given even their consistently better technical skills and international ranking, Mexican squads have been unable to beat US squads on US soil and have even had difficulty beating them in Mexico.³⁹⁴ A journalist sought out a psychologist to explain the nine-year slump. Her article appeared in February 2008 in the health section of the national daily, *El Universal*. Dr. José de Jesús González Núñez, president of the Institute for Research in Clinical and Social Psychology (IIPCS), affirmed that "the principal problem" with the Mexican team "is the lack of leadership by some players... [N]obody... wants to put on the jersey of a hero, because it implies responsibility and standing out from the group. Unconsciously this generates jealousies, and so it is preferable to blend in and not stand out." In his argument, González Núñez repeats the diagnosis found in the literature I have cited throughout this dissertation. In the soccer field "we pay homage to others because we scorn ourselves, we have low self-esteem, when we see foreigners (especially white foreigners) we return to playing our role as the vanquished."³⁹⁵

"By definition," continues González Núñez, "we are a conquered people and as a result little valued before our own eyes." This is why Mexico also performs so poorly in soccer matches against Argentina, Italy, and Germany. Mexico loses as an "effect of seeing white people, sure of themselves, implacable, egocentric, disciplined, and consequently with a very high self-esteem." But as González Núñez writes, "against national squads that have the same psychological, social and economic conditions as our own," Mexico can win, as for example, against Brazil and some other European and South American sides, because Mexicans perceive them as competitions between equals.³⁹⁶ Remember here the commentators' enthusiasm about Mexicans achieving an attitude of "*tu a tu*" during their match with the Germans in the 1998 World Cup.

Unlike the taxicab driver I spoke to, González Núñez sees signs of low self-esteem and lack of leadership even in the play of Rafael Márquez, a defensive mid-fielder for FC Barcelona and captain of the Mexican squad. When playing for Barcelona, Márquez "rarely errors in guarding a forward, but against the United States he is invariably negligent, he commits fouls and gets himself thrown out of the game, actions that result in goals for the United States."³⁹⁷ Among other incidents, González Núñez is referring to the Round of Sixteen 2002 World Cup match between Mexico and the United States when Márquez, frustrated by Mexico's imminent loss, high kicked and head-butted the US star player Cobi Jones.³⁹⁸

González Núñez, the author of over a dozen books and professor of psychology at the National

394For a summary of the latest Mexican defeat on U.S. soil, see Carlisle, "Mexico's misery in Columbus continues."

395Ojanguren, "Factor psicológico en derrotas."

396Ibid.

397Ibid.

398In the last confrontation between the teams from Mexico and the United States, Márquez, once again, got ejected from the game for a studs-up challenge of a U.S. player. See Carlisle, "Mexico's misery in Columbus continues."

Autonomous University of Mexico, pushes forward the diagnosis already given by Ramos, Paz, and others, by applying it to novel situations, as that of professional and international sports. “We Mexicans generally distance ourselves from the paternal figure; we rival the father, compete against him... envy him.” The coach for the national team, Hugo Sánchez, “represents the paternal figure,” and as such the players attempt to compete against him and “are incapable from a psychological point of view of putting on the jersey of leader or hero due to the rivalry that they have with the coach.” Sánchez, it is important to note, is considered to be the best Mexican soccer player of all time. Furthermore, he is notoriously volatile in temperament and, as the national coach, is known for his rash and highly charged judgments. Many criticize him for being an incarnation of Ramos’ *pelado*, the emblem of everything that is wrong with Mexican men. According to González Núñez’s analysis, Mexican soccer players are like Mexican boys in that their admiration for their fathers, their distance from them, their rivalry with them, all contribute to a dysfunctional relationship.³⁹⁹

Players who have good relationships with their fathers and father figures, González Núñez argues, generally are able to triumph. This is why the 2005 adolescent Mexican team was able to win the U-17 World Cup. Jesús Ramírez, the coach of the 2005 U-17 team, unlike Sánchez, was able to be an authentic paternal figure to these athletes “and the players assimilated him as such; the result was the World Championship.”⁴⁰⁰ But Mexicans will only continue to lose in international soccer in the future, according to González Núñez, because the problem is “highly complex” and can only be adequately addressed in the long term by attacking root causes. What is needed is a team of appropriately trained sport psychologists that can work with coaches and players over a long period of time.

Dos Santos and Vela, the stars of the U-17 World Cup, and Márquez as captain, are all now celebrated players in the covetous Spanish League. But even with such stars, Hugo Sánchez was unable to coach the Mexican squad to victory against the United States in the United States.⁴⁰¹ In an encounter in February 2008, the Houston stadium overflowed with Mexican and Mexican-American fans, but even overwhelming fan support has not been enough. What exactly is home-soil advantage anyway? In the press conference following the game, Sánchez said: “I know there are a lot of Mexicans here and we thank them for their presence, but Houston is a US city, and they [US players] have had the best results lately.” When asked about Dos Santos and Vela, he concurred with the widespread belief that they are good players because they have not been weighed down by a sense of inferiority and resentment: “I am happy because the new generations are at a competitive level, I like the personality and character with which they face the challenge.” However, in the end, he could only attribute Mexico’s loss to the magical power of soil or biological advantages. The Mexican team, continued Sánchez, needs “to find resources for when they compete against teams made up of athletes as tall as basketball players,” resources sufficient to confront their superior physical strength.⁴⁰²

399Ojanguren, “Factor psicológico en derrotas.”

400 In a move to better things, the coach for the victorious U-17 squad, Jesús Ramírez, replaced Hugo Sánchez as the head coach of the Mexican national team.

401 The final score was 2-2. What is important here, however, is that a tie was not satisfying for Mexican fans. The article that I cite below, for example, speaks of it as if it had been a loss.

402 de Anda, “‘Se mostró carácter’: El estratega destaca la labor de Carlos Vela y Giovanni dos Santos, quienes mostraron personalidad y compromiso.”

Electoral Democratization is Individualization, is Denationalization

I use González Núñez's analysis as it appears in the article in *El Universal* to demonstrate a movement from nation to individual. What is to be noted is not that Mexicans continue to be defeated in arenas as disparate as the economy and international soccer, but that the responsibility for their defeat today can be analyzed at the personal level. It would have been unthinkable to Ramos and Paz, and even more so to Ezequiel Chávez who wrote his founding contribution to the literature diagnosing the Mexican national character in 1900, to recommend that the problems facing the nation could be cured by individuals seeking out therapy.

Although Mexicans certainly continue to be nationalists, the collective optimism inspired by the consolidation of the Revolutionary regime in the 1930s and bolstered by the mid-century Mexican Miracle of economic and cultural development has by now largely dissipated. Hope, today, comes less from governmental policies and more from the personal opportunity that markets provide. The only miracles that seem possible today are those individual-sized self-help miracles of personal development and advancement. Between individuals and the relatively inaccessible realm of powerful cliques, mafias, transnational organizations and forces, there is a gaping chasm. If the sense of sharing a common history, territory, language, and destiny was ever strong enough to provide a meaningful and all encompassing sentiment of belonging, it no longer does. Passionate demonstrations of patriotism can be attributed more easily to feelings of isolation, of nostalgia for a national collective that might never have existed, of desires to indulge in a collective experience, than to a durable sentiment that persists and brings fellow nationals together beyond the international sporting events they follow or national holidays they celebrate.

National belonging, whatever it was in the past, is today one personal attribute among others. Gilles Lipovetsky was right in arguing that electoral democracy and consumer choice are twin results of the development of individualism.⁴⁰³ To cast one vote among millions for political candidates is not fundamentally a different sort of practice than choosing what one buys. They both enact the limited power of individuals living in industrialized democracies—one person, one vote, one purchase. Nobody is obliged by some essence to feel implicated in the victories and defeats of a national soccer squad. If it is still not the case that the choice between cheering on the American or Mexican team in soccer matches is of the same order as that between choosing between Coke or Pepsi, they are closer today than they have ever been. Today, it is possible to conceive of the sense of worthlessness that in Mexico has often been attributed to the national character, as external to any single individual. Is it not within the power of individuals to appropriate a positive attitude about themselves?

Motivation Acts on What is Universal in Humans

This past spring the former President of Mexico, Vicente Fox, met with the director of the Mexican Soccer Federation. He proposed that an educational program for players on the national team be held at his center. "It is an educative, formative process that converts people—who sometimes feel defeated—into real winners," explained Fox.⁴⁰⁴ The program would be conducted

403Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing modern democracy*.

404The Editors, "Tiene Fox secreto para ayudar al Tri."

in conjunction with The Pacific Center, a Seattle-based organization whose mission states: “The application of our education empowers people to recognize their ability to choose growth, personal freedom and personal excellence.”⁴⁰⁵ They have a proven track record, Fox explained, “in the United States with soccer teams... and the national team for Guatemala...” The gold medal performances of the Chinese divers and the United States swimming team in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing have also been attributed to their program.⁴⁰⁶

The news article in *El Universal* reminds the reader that the Mexican national soccer team, “[s]ince a very long time... has been characterized for failing when it counts, for falling in decisive encounters.” Apparently Fox, like González Núñez, believes that the problem with the Mexican national soccer team is in the minds of the players. The solution is to “use the mind better, with greater efficiency and better results.”⁴⁰⁷ If this is indeed the case then The Pacific Institute would be a good partner. In the words of the president of the Canadian Psychological Association, the Institute has been in the business for over thirty years of “transferring knowledge from psychology to organizational settings, educational settings, public sector, private sector.”⁴⁰⁸ Fox is convinced that it is in this transfer of “scientific knowledge” where the key to improved results with the Mexican national soccer team is to be found. The Pacific Institute curriculum, he affirms, can make “winners of people, who at the moment, are not at that level.”⁴⁰⁹

According to the short promotional clip on The Pacific Institute home page, their methods are based on a set of techniques developed beginning in the late 1960s known as cognitive therapy. As Martin Seligman explains it, “Cognitive therapy teaches you to become a disputer of catastrophic thinking... To teach the self-talk as if it was done by an external agent whose job in life was to make you miserable.” Since “catastrophic thinking” has been related to Mexican national character, it is easy to imagine that this program would focus on aiding players to externalize this mode of thought. Assuming that players in fact do feel some of the inferiority that Ramos and others have described as inherent to being Mexican, these players could benefit, the argument goes, from learning to see that sentiment of relative worthlessness as imposed upon them “by an external agent whose job in life was to make” them miserable.⁴¹⁰

This conclusion is supported by the About Us page of The Pacific Institute's website. It begins with a sentence conveying the founders' desire to use their educational program to the benefit of “people all over the world.” This is possible, as subsequently explained, because “Yes, cultural differences do exist. However, the basic knowledge of how the mind works is constant from individual to individual, continent to continent.” The purpose of their program, as with cognitive therapy in general, is to tap into the universal potentials of the individual human mind. Mexicans, as humans generally, have no reason to feel inherently inferior to others. The “catastrophic thinking” that many have learned, the particular history of military and soccer losses, is not to be found in the depths of their own minds but is external to it. Each player is an individual who can overcome his own mental barriers to performing optimally. According to this logic, it is not

405The Pacific Institute, “The Pacific Institute: About Us.”

406The Editors, “Tiene Fox secreto para ayudar al Tri.”

407Ibid.

408The Pacific Institute, “The Pacific Institute: About Us.”

409Ibid.

410Ibid.

nations that battle against each other on the soccer field, but individuals who have learned the psychological tools necessary to push themselves and consistently perform at their maximum potential.

Conclusion

None of the writers that I worked with were big fans of the Mexican national soccer team. It was as if they disdained the popular enthusiasm for the team as an expression of a lack of cultivation. It was not that they were not interested in soccer, just that they were not particularly affected by the poor performance of the national team. For example, Ari does not follow Mexican soccer at all. Both he and Ozam are big fans of FC Barcelona, a club in the Spanish League. Even though Ozam does watch matches in which the Mexican national team competes, he never seems to be as excited by their performance as he is by that of the Catalan squad. He would complain to me of being depressed for days if Barcelona lost. I have the feeling that in international matches, what interests them both is less the competition between nations *per se* as the opportunity to watch their favorite players compete on the international stage.

I once had a conversation about soccer with Juan Manuel Servín about. I mentioned that I had read a short chronicle of his in which he said that one of his brothers is a fan of the Mexican club known as the Chivas.⁴¹¹ This, in itself, has national implications since the Chivas are the only Mexican club that vaunts a “100% Mexican” roster. Most teams in Mexico have at least a couple of star players from South America or other countries, some of whom over time become naturalized citizens. The Chivas, however, do not accept even naturalized Mexicans. All of their players were born in Mexico. Servín told me that he followed Mexican soccer as a way of maintaining a connection with the rest of his family, since they do not share his interest in literature.

I introduced this chapter with the argument that Monsiváis puts in the mouth of the protagonist of one of his chronicles. He wrote that Mexicans implicate themselves in the victories and defeats of the Mexican national team “because civic mindedness has atrophied, and patriotism now has very few opportunities for existence.”⁴¹² However, it needs to be made clear that the Mexicans who implicate themselves in this way are not usually intellectuals or writers from the middle class. Paz, as I noted earlier, wrote that the cry *Viva México, hijos de la chingada*, as shouted by those celebrating a soccer victory, “comes to *our* mouths when rage, joy or enthusiasm drives us to exalt *our* condition as Mexicans.”⁴¹³ Even though he repeatedly uses the pronoun “our”, it is difficult to imagine that Paz, the revered intellectual that he was, ever yelled this cry with the intensity and psychological necessity described in Monsiváis' chronicle.

What has occurred, as I have repeatedly attempted to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, is that the unifying function of the national intellectual has been abandoned. National writers, like Paz, looked to the practices and attitudes of subaltern classes in Mexico in order to find some characteristics that could be elaborated into national character traits. In a country with such a small bourgeoisie, assuming peasant and proletarian modes of existence as one's own certainly

411Servín, “Mejor llámale al FBI (Nexos, enero 2006),” 95.

412Monsiváis, *Los rituales del caos*, 33.

413Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*, 82; emphasis is mine.

must have appeared as the way forward for forging a national spirit.⁴¹⁴ Today, however, it is not clear that there is anything to be gained by bourgeois intellectuals imagining that they share attitudes and character traits with other groups.

The national soccer team has become a metonymy for the nation. It is one instance, among a finite set, of the nation represented in the abstract. International competitions, like Independence Day ceremonies, provide individuals with an occasion to perform national belonging. These celebrations are post-national, only because the nation is performance confined to the event.⁴¹⁵ If it is difficult to imagine Paz celebrating a Mexican national soccer victory in the way that some Mexicans do; it is even more difficult to imagine Monsiváis doing so. In his chronicle, he does not even include himself in what he writes, as Paz did, by using inclusive pronouns. He is occluded from the text altogether, effecting a distance between himself and the phenomenon he chronicles. Even more importantly, his protagonist, in debating and analyzing in his own mind whether or not he should participate in the soccer celebration, demonstrates the degree to which implicating oneself in victories and defeats of a national team is not a given or necessary, even for Mexicans who have previously felt themselves implicated.

I draw on González Núñez's explanation of Mexican soccer defeats in order to demonstrate how the attitude that has been attributed to Mexicans as a nation, by the national character literature that I cite, is today attributed to individuals. It is no longer possible to imagine, as Ramos and Paz did, that national complexes can be exorcised collectively. Individuals today are responsible for freeing themselves of their mental impediments and developing habits appropriate for optimal performance. This logic is clearly exemplified by the former president of Mexico, Vicente Fox, in recommending that the national team undergo a program of motivational training conducted by his Center in conjunction with The Pacific Institute. If Mexicanness, as imagined in the Mexican national character literature, is associated with a feeling of worthlessness and a debilitating solitude, then the purpose of motivational training is to externalize, if not entirely banish, that Mexicanness. Motivated individuals who perform optimally are postnational individuals to the degree that they transcend impediments they might inherit from history or from the national group they are interpolated by. In using the latest psychological science for tapping the full potential of the human mind, in cultivating positive thinking, an attitude is adopted that is alien to particularist modes of thought.

In the online edition of a local newspaper in Guanajuato, the home state of Fox, the news item covering his plans for the national soccer team received over two dozen comments. Three of them were positive, one was neutral, and the other twenty-three were negative. The latter were critical of Fox's presidency, critical of the national soccer team, and critical of the motivational program. Isabella Obregón wrote, "Ha, ha, ha! The 'Great Victor' now wants to share his 'secret'!!" Fox was the first president of Mexico, after more than seventy years, to come from a party other than the Institutionalized Revolutionary Party (PRI). Before entering politics Fox was the president of Coca Cola in Mexico. He ran a campaign for president that promised change. In

414"After the Revolution, the Mexican nationalists, orphans of native bourgeois traditions, had only the peasants and the proletariat as sources of inspiration. An ideological dissection had to be performed in order to extract some features of popular culture for elevation to the category of national ideology; other aspects, considered irrelevant, were to be disposed of." Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and metamorphosis in the Mexican character*.

415Monsiváis, *Los rituales del caos*, 37.

the rest of her comment, Obregón makes reference to the political spin that Fox became known for, how he was able to put the best light on what she calls his lack of intelligence, mediocrity, and inflated ego. Soraida Martínez commented that if the motivational course that he is offering the athletes is so good, why did he not use it to make Mexico a better country: “But the opposite happened during his administration, Mexico fell several places in various aspects.” Finally, somebody calling himself Digno Guanajuatense commented, “Fox, with the crisis that you left the country sunk in, you still come up with this? Imagine if you get the national team... they won't go to the World Cup until the year 3040.”⁴¹⁶

If one was not aware of the prevalence of snide comments generally in online discussion forums, one could be forgiven for believing that the cynicism of these were expressions of a national attitude. At least one of the positive comments, for example, was made by an individual who mentions that he lives in the United States. Could it be that the few upbeat commenters have adopted an American optimism? This is the nature of the post-Mexican condition, that individual Mexicans are free, and have the personal responsibility to adopt an appropriate attitude for themselves. National tropes, such as the resentment, the sense of worthlessness that Mexicans feel, their solitude, their *malinchismo*, continue to circulate. However, as they appear in the literature that I deal with throughout this dissertation, they are increasingly external to individuals. The commenters to the article about Fox and his motivational program for the Mexican soccer squad, for example, today can no longer be considered as emblematic Mexicans. They are cynical individuals, individuals who would benefit from therapy or a motivational curriculum.

416See comments to Nieto López, “Va Vicente Fox por el Tri.”

Vignette: “Mixing Ass With Business”

With this vignette I wish to accomplish four things. First, as with the others, its purpose is to give some living color from my field experiences to what appears in the chapters. Second, I want to address the issue of gender. Although a more complete version of this research would have to include an in depth analysis of the role of women in national narratives and how that is changing today, in lieu of that I give a relatively long sketch of a female editor. Third, I want to also address the role that sex can play in the business of writing and publishing. As with gender, this vignette is far from an exhaustive treatment of the subject. By including it, however, I hint at a possible better and more rounded account of writing post-Mexicanness. Finally, this vignette gives a closing account to my research. If my first vignette related my insertion into a network of individuals, this one gives an image of me, the researcher, as I withdraw.

“That is what happens to me for having mixed ass with business,” Estela repeated.⁴¹⁷ Day before yesterday, when the new issue of her magazine had come from the press, Estela had apparently been even more livid than she was when I saw her yesterday. Judith showed me several times a gesture that Estela had done. It consisted in her shaking her index fingers up and down together out in front of her, signifying a length of about six inches. Estela had done this while saying, “Because of *this* everything has gone to hell!”

I knew nothing about the fiasco when I arrived to the offices of the profit-driven publisher of a commercial magazine at about ten thirty yesterday morning. As is my custom, I went from room to room and from desk to desk saying hi to everyone. It had been several months since I had visited last. The new secretary was in the meeting room with a tall thin man with glasses preparing magazines to be mailed off to subscribers. Mariela, the advertising manager, was in her cubicle, and seemed to be more anxious and preoccupied than usual. Ronaldo, the graphic designer, was in the room in the back working on his G4 Macintosh computer. I did not think about checking in on Judith, the magazine’s lawyer. Estela’s door was closed, and Gustavo, the editor, was in his office. I asked Gustavo how he was doing, and he replied, “Good, Professor, good.” Gustavo always calls me “Professor.” I asked him again how things were for him, gesturing toward the new issue laying on his desk, trying to elicit unsuccessfully a more elaborate response. In as far as work and the magazines were concerned, Gustavo would not budge, would not expand on his “good” and “fine.”

In November and December there had been a big fight between Estela and Gustavo in which Judith and Ronaldo had played a part. I had made a visit to their offices right after number 35 had come back from the printers. Back then Gustavo had been much more vocal to me about what he thought of that issue. “It is an all time editorial low point for us,” he had said while shoving the magazine across his desk at me. The front cover had been sold to a corporation that was celebrating their thirtieth anniversary, and featured prominently their logo. “It is bad enough that Estela as director should run everything according to the bottom line, but to sell the front cover, allowing it to be dominated by a logo, that is really too much!” A journal, according to Gustavo, should maintain at least some semblance of impartiality and objectivity, be guided by editorial and design standards of quality that are not for sale.

⁴¹⁷In this vignette, the names of all non-writers have been changed in order to protect their identity.

Although the front cover, and the editorial that Gustavo wrote justifying it were the occasion for the tension, rancor had been accumulating for some time. Once Mariela had overheard Gustavo talking bad about Estela to a client, and another time recommending someone interested in a course they sponsored not to take it because it was run very poorly. Estela really was upset about the situation and was even getting depressed. Judith as the publisher's lawyer and Estela's best friend decided to take action. As she told me one day while drinking coffee at the Santa Fe Mall, she personally could not tolerate Gustavo making Estela's life miserable. If Gustavo wants to "write literature," then he should do that somewhere else. This publisher, however, is a business, and its business is making money. "What Gustavo does not seem to understand is that his salary depends on the success of this business, that thanks to Estela he is able to eat." Judith reminded me of how difficult it is to find employment in Mexico City, and by reminding me she was implying that Gustavo should be grateful with what he has and stop causing trouble.

Judith's solution to the problem was the following: together with their year-end-bonuses everyone would be handed a letter of resignation that they would be required to sign should they want to come back to work in January. If they did not sign they would be immediately fired. Judith felt that she could win a lawsuit against Gustavo and maybe even Ronaldo should they refuse. As she explained to me, having employees sign letters of resignation is a common practice in Mexico, and the fact that Estela had never asked this of her workers before was just one more example of how she had been overly generous to them, treating them better than they deserved. The idea is that with signed letters of resignation on file for each of her employees, Estela would be able to effectively fire whomever she wished, whenever she wished, without risking litigation. "Labor laws in Mexico have been written in ways that unduly favor workers. They are idealistic and if applied to the letter of the law they would be a serious impediment to business," Judith explained. Requiring workers to sign letters of resignation as a condition of employment is one way to get around these laws.

Except for Nora, who had been dismissed for other reasons, everything seemed to be pretty much the same to me as before, except that it was not. Gustavo never gave me his opinion on the new issue of the magazine, even though as I found out later he certainly would have had a lot to say about it. As often happens, Gustavo, Ronaldo, and I ended up in Gustavo's office shooting the breeze. At one point the conversation turned to women, to how women in Mexico City are not as good looking generally speaking as women in other cities. Moreover, the few that are good looking are usually arrogant, as for example, they pointed out, those that live in the Condesa. Ronaldo mentioned that all these women want a man with money and a nice car. Gustavo replied that if a woman wants a nice car then she should also bring something to the relationship. From his experience beautiful women have "nothing upstairs." We commented on women from other countries. Ronaldo, for example, brought up Argentineans. I wondered why he chose them. His wife is from Uruguay. Gustavo concluded the conversation by saying that he was sure that regardless of how the woman looks, if she is Mexican, a romance with her, "making love" to her would be better than with a woman from any other country.

We also talked about my return to Berkeley the following month. Gustavo and Ronaldo were curious concerning my reasons for leaving Mexico. I told them that it was time for me to start writing my dissertation, my fellowship money had run out, and I hoped to help teach an anthropology course over the summer. They asked me how my experience had been in Mexico

over all. “Have you learned to *alburear*?” *Albur* denotes an apparently common word that has a sexual double meaning. To *alburear* is to engage in a play of words, to emphasize the hidden sexual meaning of seemingly banal conversation, creatively manipulating it in such a way as to humiliate your interlocutors. Every Mexican that I have spoken to about the subject is sure that *albureando* is an exclusively Mexican pastime, hence Gustavo and Ronaldo’s question. As a way of provocation I commented to them that in Brazil people also engage in similar word plays. When I first went to Brazil it was not only difficult for me since I did not speak Portuguese very well and thus did not always understand the primary meaning of words let alone the hidden secondary meaning. I was an easy target and suffered humiliations many of which I never understood. Both Gustavo and Ronaldo gave me a look that told me that they had their doubts, but they did not say anything more on the subject.

About that time Jaime arrived. He has let his reddish beard grow long and has shaved the rest of his hair on his head very short. I told him he looks like a rabbi. Apparently I am not the only one to think so. Estela even went as far as to buy him a yarmulke to wear. Jaime asked me if I wanted some coffee. I accepted. We went into the back storage area and as the coffee machine worked away on the coffee, Jaime told me about his new job editing on the weekends for the Mexican edition of *Newsweek*. Although Jaime writes about eighty percent of the articles for both Estela’s magazines, he still has to work at other odd jobs to finance his relatively austere existence. For example, he also works on the side as a paramedic. He was especially happy about the *Newsweek* job, though, because at least it had something to do with writing that was not so commercial in nature. He told me that the texts that he gets from the translators have the English original and Spanish translation mixed together. He creates the final Spanish document by cutting and pasting out the Spanish parts and editing them. He told me that the English articles often seem to him very biased. Recently there was an article that referred to the “diminutive wife” of the Peruvian president. He felt that given the context, “diminutive” was pejorative, so he cut the word out of the final Spanish version. He enjoys working with the translators and editors, “They are an interesting group of people,” who do odd jobs on the side just as he does to finance their more literary work.

Later when I walked by Jaime’s desk I noticed that the webpage that he had opened had a picture of him on it. I asked him what it was. It was a webpage for La Tortilleria (<http://tortilleria.vientos.info>). The idea behind the website is to provide a space where writers can publish their work online for free. Those readers who would like to print out their work can also do so without having to pay the website or the author any fees. As Jaime explained it to me, if someone in Berkeley wanted to, they could print out a book and even sell it on the street in order to earn money for themselves. The benefit to the author is that their work gets read. Jaime already has over a dozen texts, mostly poems, on this website, but now he is working on a book with another writer that will be also published there.

Jaime is also the editor of a new literary magazine called *SIC*. He told me that I could find the second number in the Forum Shakespeare very near where I live. I asked him how the creative writing workshop that he is taking with Alberto Chimal is going. It is held in Cuore Café here in the Roma neighborhood, where Jaime and I once went together. He said that it was going well. I mentioned that I noticed that Alberto Chimal had written a piece for the latest *Replicante*. Jaime already knew about it. He informed me that Chimal also has contributed to *SIC*, in fact he was

one of the speakers at the inauguration of the magazine that I attended at the Forum Shakespeare sometime back.

Everyone crowded around Jaime's work area when he came into the office. Judith came out of her office, Mariela out of her cubicle, and Ronaldo out from his area in the back to greet Jaime. Ronaldo had a copy of the new issue of one of their magazines in his hand. "Have you seen this yet Jaime? It is a piece of shit! Look at it!" Ronaldo said as he violently threw the magazine down onto Jaime's desk. "Well let me see it before you throw it away," replied Jaime as he picked the magazine back up. Ronaldo grabbed the magazine from him flipping to pages where the tops had been cut off, so much so in some cases that the letters of titles and even a person's head in a photograph had been trimmed. The printing was of a very poor quality; at least two pages had half of the letter printed in dark black and the other half in a lighter black. Jaime, with the issue back in his hands, said that the paper felt different, of a much inferior quality than before. Everyone was critical and quite upset. Mariela fumed but said nothing even when Jaime asked her how she was going to enjoy her job now, going around to advertisers and showing them the shabby magazine their advertisements appeared in, or even worse, trying to get new advertisers by showing them a magazine that looked worse than if it had been done as a "school project."

Apparently it was not the first time that something like this happened. Jaime said that the last number of another of their magazines fell apart in people's hands because the glue did not hold the binding together. I learned that the problems had come because Estela had decided a few months ago to entrust the printing of the magazines to her boyfriend Javier. Javier had told her that he could save her three hundred dollars by taking it to a printer that he knew. Well the money was saved alright, but what would the real costs be in loss of advertising and loss of their brand with subscribers and readers?

Just then Javier came out of Estela's office. The door had been closed up until then. "What is all the commotion about?" he asked. Estela emerged behind him. She did not look the least bit happy. Almost at once everyone started in complaining to Javier, enumerating the ever growing list of printing errors. Just then Ronaldo discovered that in addition to all the other problems, the number was also smaller than the previous ones had been. He put an older number behind the new one and about a quarter of an inch of the older one emerged from behind the newer one on two sides. Estela looked at Javier, and he looked back. "Well I guess they made some errors for you," is what he said to her. Jaime showed him the pages where the color of black of the letters changes half way through the page. "I suppose printers sometimes have problems." Just then the tall thin man with glasses came running out of the meeting room yelling "Congratulations Javier! Congratulations! I really thought that you were going to take two months to get this number printed but it only took you one! Very good! You should be proud of yourself." Javier just stared at him. I later learned that the printing of the magazine had taken unusually long. As Javier walked out the front door he turned and said, "As time goes on the quality of the printing will improve little by little." After he left, Jaime mumbled mostly to himself, "little by little, is not good enough."

Estela followed Javier out and it was a few minutes before she was back. "Sorry Alberto, I am not attending to you properly," she said as she gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. I complimented her on her bright pink top and matching makeup. "Give me a few minutes and I

will be right with you. As you can see there are a lot of things that need taking care of.” Judith asked me if I was hungry, if I wanted to go eat lunch together. “Yes, I am hungry, but whatever you and Estela decide to do is fine with me.” After speaking with Estela, she informed me that the three of us would go eat just as soon as Estela could pull herself away from the office. After Judith left to get her car, I decided to say goodbye to everyone and go and wait outside. As I was walking out the door Gustavo called out to me from his office. “Professor, are you leaving? Can you come here a moment?” I walked back into his office and noticed that he was writing in the front of a book. Later I was able to read what he had been written, “To my good friend Mr. Alberto Sánchez Allred go these well sung SONGS. Con un deseo, Máyne/06.” “Songs,” I saw, was the title of a collection of short stories by Gustavo that had been published by Plaza y Valdés in 2002. I assured Gustavo that I would read it, and that we would keep in touch even when I went back to Berkeley.

As I waited by the curb I paged through Gustavo’s book. I was reading the beginning of a story when Judith came up to me. “What do you have there?” she asked. “A book that Gustavo gave me, a book that he wrote,” I replied. She made a face that revealed her disgust for the man. “And how is it?” “Well, I don’t know yet.” It was obvious that she was not impressed, so I told her that it seemed to me no small feat to get published by a respectable publisher as he had. I thought about her comments to me about Gustavo and his writing “literature”, but said nothing. “When are you going to publish a book Alberto?” “Oh, it won’t be for another few years or so.”

As we sat in her car and waited for Estela, Judith told me twists and turns in her plans to go to the United States. Her dream, for many years now, is to have a law practice that specializes in binational cases between the United States and Mexico. All through school, she had a pact with a boyfriend of hers that she would study law in Mexico City, he would study law in Los Angeles, and afterward, together, they would put up a binational practice. Everything went as planned until he fell in love and got married in the United States to someone else. Judith is still quite upset by the whole thing. She feels betrayed, more by the fact that her business plan had been thwarted than by the loss of a lover. Her new plan is to go to the United States herself, study law there, and still put up her binational practice as she has always dreamed of, only this time all by herself.

Sometime back, I had told her the little I knew about law school in the United States and financing an education. Yesterday she informed me what she had found out so far, how difficult it is to get a student visa. “The best way, as far as I can tell, is for me to get married to an American.” Although I sensed where the conversation was heading, I waited patiently for her to continue. She asked me if I thought that I could find someone willing to marry her for her green card when I got back to the United States. “Certainly you can find someone via the Internet that would be willing.” “No, I would rather it be someone that you knew.” “Hmm. Well we will see what I can do,” I said in a way that emphasized that I was not making any promises. Finally she seemed to have gotten her courage up and asked what had been on her mind from the beginning, “Alberto, would you marry me? I would pay you a lot of money.”

After replying no, that I would not, both of us seemed to want to make light of the situation. I joked that I would write in my field book, “Today was a good day. Judith asked me to marry her.” “Did you know Judith that Judith is the name that I am going to give you in my dissertation?” Judith not only rhymes with Judith, but for some strange reasons since I met Judith

I have had to work very hard to keep myself from calling her Judith. She laughed. It was a good joke it seemed, because she repeated it several times later on. "Today was a good day. Judith asked me to marry her."

Judith called Estela on her mobile phone to find out what was taking her so long. It turned out that Estela had run into the owner of the building. Judith uses her office at the magazine publisher to conduct the rest of law practice, but it has gotten too small for her. For several months she has been looking for a new office, but Estela has not wanted her to leave. Finally Judith told her about a space that had opened up in the same building. The only problem is that they do not rent to lawyers, "Surely because they are up to no good." Since Estela wants her to stay nearby, she said that she would sign the lease for the new office space. Judith would in turn loan part of the office to Estela, who can use it for a place to get away and to have private meetings with clients. As I could tell from their telephone conversation, they were competing in their bid with some architects who also wanted to lease the space.

When Estela finally came out of the building, I opened the passenger side door and crawled into the back seat leaving her the passenger seat. Estela protested, saying that she could have gotten in the back herself. Judith made a comment about me being the man but yet sitting in the back seat. I said that "being in *back* was a good place for a man to be." Estela agreed, "I like a man to be in *back* of me." Judith was surprised. "Alberto has learned something since he has lived in Mexico!" She meant that I had learned to *alburear*. "I have only learned from the best," I replied. "Erect until ejaculation," I said as Judith pulled out into traffic. "Erect" rhymes with "straight ahead" in Spanish. It was a phrase that Estela had used long ago when she had wanted Judith to go "straight ahead" in the parking lot of the Banamex convention center when we went to an expo there back in September. They laughed and seemed surprised that I had remembered the phrase. Judith joked that Estela was going to appear in my dissertation as the "foul-mouthed female magazine director."

We decided to go to Carol's Café, which is actually only three blocks away from the office. I like the place. The walls are covered in dark wood paneling and the decor on the whole seems to be very seventies. I had eaten there with Estela once before. This time Estela and Judith sat on two ends of a square table and I sat on the third end facing a window. "I recommend the Lebanese styled eggs," Estela told us. "Lebanese eggs, huh?" "Eggs" is also the common term for testicles in Spanish. "Yes, I don't know about Lebanese eggs in general (read testicles), but here they are very good!" The game continued throughout our meal until after we had finished eating the dish that consisted in two eggs dropped into a burning hot ceramic pot served with olive oil and spices on top. By mixing the eggs with one's fork the eggs are cooked by coming into contact with the pot. The eggs were accompanied by Arabic bread and small dishes of yogurt. We also order chilaquiles for all of us, a dish that consists of fried tortilla pieces covered in a chili sauce. In the Mexican world of *alburess*, "chile" is perhaps the most common word with a sexual connotation. The chili sauce of the chilaquiles was spicy. "*El chile me pico!*" admitted Estela. *Picar* is used to refer to the burning action that hot peppers can effect in one's mouth, but it also means more generally to poke. I did not need to come to Mexico to know that by saying that the hot sauce had burned her mouth Estela was making the sexual innuendo that she had been penetrated. I could not, for example, make a similar confession without calling into question my heterosexual masculinity, certainly not with the mischievous delight that Estela had written all

over her face.

“So why are you going back to Berkeley?” Estela asked. “Among other things because my research is coming to a close and my money has run out.” “I would have maintained you here, given you enough money to live with writing for the magazine,” Estela told me, “but you never gave me the *product*.” The sexual innuendo continued. We had talked about me writing a literary column for one of their magazines. “The problem was that you guys never talked money, never *closed the deal*,” judged Judith. “I am not going to talk money until I *see something*, try it out,” declared Estela. She held out her cupped hand in front of me, with her fingers separated, shaking it back and forth as if she were shaking balls, shaking my *balls*. “It seems to me that Alberto is *huevo*.” A *Huevo* is a lazy man.⁴¹⁸ Judith defended me, “No he isn’t lazy. He has talent. Don’t you remember the article of his in the magazine *Replicante* that I showed you?” Estela, however, was not going to let me off so easily, “Was that the one that your father had written corrections all over?” “Yes, but that was my brother who did that,” corrected Judith. “Alberto, you need to learn how to *sell yourself*.” That was Estela’s conclusion to the conversation.

“I asked Alberto to marry me for my green card. I told him I would pay him a lot of money,” blurted out Judith. “And?” asked Estela turning toward me. “I told her no. I am already in a committed relationship,” I answered. “Yes, but that was for love. Now this would be for business.” I went on the offensive, “Is that what you have done Estela? Judith told me about your problem with—how is it that you put it?—‘Mixing ass with business’.” Estela laughed. She repeated her gesture that Judith had already imitated for me, shook up and down her index fingers separated one from the other by a length of roughly six inches; “Because of this I have run into problems.” Later Judith told me that Estela had given the job of printing magazines to Javier because it allowed for her to control him. For years Estela has wanted to marry Javier but he refuses to get married with her, partly because he is still married to another woman, and partly because as Estela has told me, “He does not love me as I love him.” Last time that Estela and I had gone to Carol’s café, she had told me that she was looking for another man. That she was ready to move on and leave Javier behind. Yesterday, however, she said that she felt that they would always be together; they have too much history together to throw it all away.

In fact Estela does have another man. He is a Columbian immigrant to Mexico. Estela officially calls him her ex-boyfriend. Now they are business partners, running a café that opened in the Condesa, the neighborhood that I lived in. He too has refused to marry Estela, but as Judith says comes around to the office to hang out for most of the day and waste her time. He is a doctor and according to them very popular with women. The other day Estela and Judith were at his clinic and a young Cuban woman came up to him. “You know how Cuban women are.” She flirted and propositioned him right there in front of Estela. Another time Estela was with him in his car and a well dressed young woman got off a bus at the stoplight just to tell him that he was sexy and to try to get his number. “He used to be a model for men’s clothing,” Estela informed us. He is black, and in letting me in on this detail Judith and Estela got into a discussion with regard to the positive and negative aspects of black men. The conclusion was that Estela likes them, Judith does not, but Judith has never slept with one.

Over the past months Jaime and Judith had expressed to me their concerns that Estela was

⁴¹⁸See the vignette “The Rhetorical Value of Testis,” in this dissertation.

spreading herself too thin with her new business. Jaime complained that she no longer spent much time in the office. Judith made reference to these criticisms yesterday and then told me that Estela had defended herself by saying, “Why does everyone criticize me if it is my money and my businesses?” This logic is convincing to Judith. And as she puts it, Estela’s businesses allow her not only to be independent and successful, but to exercise some control over the men that she sleeps with.

Chapter IX: Nationalism and Remediation

Throughout this dissertation I have used the terms postnational and post-Mexican. With the prefix “post” I have suggested that some transformations have occurred to the Mexican national narrative as it appears in print over the past half decade that merits investigation. Unsurprisingly, however, the prefix and the terms that I have chosen are not without their problems. In this chapter I attempt to further clarify the situation with a concept that I adopt from communications studies, remediation. Technically speaking, in this dissertation I have described some ways that national discourse is being remediated today by the writers with whom I worked.⁴¹⁹ That is, I have followed how the tropes and attitudes associated with Mexicanness have been repurposed and made more adequate to contemporary conditions.

The Commemorative Stamps

At the end of June 2005, the Mexican Postal Service released five commemorative stamps that celebrated Memín Pingüín, a pickaninny-styled protagonist of a comic book in circulation since the 1940s. Occurring only weeks after a gaffe by the Mexican President Vicente Fox, in which he claimed that Mexican workers in the United States take jobs that “even blacks” do not, civil rights leaders and government officials in the US were quick to request that the stamps be withdrawn. What ensued in Mexico was an outpouring of patriotic defenses of race relations in Mexico, condemnation for those Americans who would meddle in and judge a situation that they did not understand, and the selling out, within a day, of the complete first run of 750,000 stamps.⁴²⁰

A couple days later, Ozam Yeyha and I were having one of our regular meetings over coffee. I was six months into my research project in Mexico City with writers, contributors to cultural magazines and literary supplements. I had found out about the incident reading the news on the Internet. At the end of our meeting, the topic came up. What caught us both by surprise, given our generally cordial conversations and budding sense of fraternity, was that we immediately and passionately disagreed. In believing the stamps to be racist, I reiterated the critical opinion of other Americans. Likewise, in defending the stamps, Ozam reiterated the opinion of most Mexicans. For two people who consider themselves marginal to majoritarian national narratives—he is an Arab-Mexican and I a US Latino—it was remarkable that we should so quickly and passionately channel the predominate opinions of our respective compatriots. Even more to the point, we spent the next couple of weeks reading articles that we found on the Internet concerning the subject, sharing them with each other, and writing emails clarifying our position. In order to understand this incident it is important to begin with a rudimentary theory of nationalism and how digital communication technologies can be used to mediate it.

Nationalism and Media

Enthusiastic outbursts during national holidays and international sporting events are,

⁴¹⁹Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding new media*; For an anthropological reflection, see Rabinow, *Marking Time: On the anthropology of the contemporary*; For a recent application of the concept, see Silvio, “Remediation and Local Globalizations: How Taiwan’s “Digital Video Knights-Errant Puppetry” Writes the History of the New Media in Chinese.”

⁴²⁰Malkin, “Fight Grows Over a Stamp U.S. Sees as Racist and Mexico Adores.”

understandably enough, attributed to a nationalist spirit. However, the sentiment of national belonging—the feeling of sharing a history, manners of expression, a territory and destiny with others—is not the sole motive for these impassioned discharges. Quite the contrary, individuals may be led to such manifestations precisely because they feel marginalized from the group they so vociferously celebrate, or otherwise insecure about their group's standing. In these cases, the outbursts become tokens for belonging. Demonstrations of nationalist pride compensate momentarily for uncertainty concerning whether that pride is at all merited.

This is one conclusion to be drawn from the 1934 classic on Mexican national character by the philosopher Samuel Ramos. In *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, Ramos writes, “The frequency of individual and collective patriotic manifestations is a symbol that the Mexican is insecure concerning the value of his nationality.”⁴²¹ Mexicans, it seems, could not help but compare themselves to their better-off neighbors to the north, to Europeans, to people living in countries that started down the road of capitalist development long before Mexico did. By comparing themselves to those living in more developed countries, argued Ramos, Mexicans provoked for themselves a feeling of inferiority.⁴²² Furthermore, they compensated for this feeling, at least partially, by engaging in enthusiastic patriotic displays.

Ramos was mistaken, however, to the degree to which he viewed the phenomenon as peculiar to Mexicans. After all, thanks to the diffusion of media and communication technologies, today people all over the globe can increasingly compare their lives to representation of those they might find better-off than their own. The Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz, was more lucid on this point. As he saw it, Mexicans were just one of a myriad of groups that find themselves at the margins of modernity. “We all have been converted into peripheral beings, even Europeans and North Americans have,” he wrote in 1970.⁴²³ For him, the solitude that one feels on the margins of modernity could become a bridge of solidarity between all those sharing the postwar “nightmare” of history.⁴²⁴

If it was true then, it is even more true today. People around the world belong to one minority or marginal group or another. Moreover, if they do not live next door to someone who comes from a different country, who speaks a different language, who belongs to a different religion or culture than their own, do not come into contact with them as they go about their daily lives, they confront them on television, in magazines, books, movies, on the telephone or while browsing the Internet. Strangers are everywhere. And even when they are not physically present, they populate our imaginations with images we borrow and adapt from media. What is remarkable is the degree to which confronting these strangers provokes insecurities for some, calling into question their own sense of belonging.

In order to make this hypothesis more precise, I need to present a specific and limited definition of what it means to be modern.⁴²⁵ For this, I draw on an insight by Walter Benjamin. He wrote in 1936 that, due to technological developments, a modern person has the right to be “mechanically

⁴²¹Ramos, *El Perfil del Hombre y la Cultura en México*, 57.

⁴²²Ibid., 51.

⁴²³Paz, *El Laberinto de la Soledad, Posdata y Vuelta a El Laberinto de la Soledad*.

⁴²⁴Cohn, “The Mexican Intelligentsia, 1950-1968: Cosmopolitanism, National Identity, and the State,” 151.

⁴²⁵The definition is only intended to help understanding the particular case that I present in this article and not meant to be generally applicable.

reproduced.” That is, they can “lay claim” to appearing in print or film. Because of the diffusion of reading and writing skills, many individuals can read about themselves in newspapers, government or business documents, diaries and letters. Furthermore, Benjamin pointed out that developments in film were quickly paralleling those that had already taken place in writing. For example, non-actors making their way through a public square, or otherwise going about their daily activities, could be captured and portrayed in the Soviet films he wrote about. These people could go to the movie theater and see themselves portrayed on screen.⁴²⁶ Benjamin, however, could not have had but an inkling concerning the degree to which the tendency he identified would become generalized.

In industrialized areas of the world today, it is not only possible but a commonplace to view oneself in any number of media. Cameras have become ubiquitous, whether professional, those used for surveillance, or of the portable consumer variety. The latter are carried about as personal accessories and available, at any moment, to capture still or moving images of people and circulate them almost instantly around the globe. Moreover, the same has become true for writing. Equipped with electronic devices, individuals can write about themselves and others, immediately circulate their texts, as well as search out and read others in which they appear. In contrast to the mechanically reproduced individuals Benjamin wrote about, today people “lay claim” to being immediately reproduced and transmitted electronically.

Never before has so many words and images been circulated with such rapidity. In their book on new media, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin suggest that people who depend on them for their lifestyle can be understood as hypermediated.⁴²⁷ These heavily mediated individuals easily identify with the perspective of cameras, whether real ones or the ones simulated in video games and virtual reality programs. More importantly, they respond to the immediacy of electronic texts. They are networked, connected, online. They depend on media input in order to acquire the up-to-date information they need live their lives. They depend on media output too in order to give themselves bolster their significance by distributing, reproducing, and managing images of themselves. The dependence that these individuals have on digital communication technologies and the amount of work that they invest in consuming and creating media representations implies a degree of instability to their identities. What I want to suggest is that this relative instability, in some instances corresponds to insecurities that individuals may have concerning their own sense of belonging.

It may seem unflattering and overly critical to call Ozam and me insecure. However, although other individuals pertaining to minorities may be confident in their sense of belonging, after our conversation and subsequent email exchanges on the subject, I can assure you that Ozam and I both grapple with feelings of never quite really belonging to any nationally defined community. This should not come as a surprise, particularly if as Paz observed many people today find that they are marginal to the modernizing national projects that governments around the world instituted during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴²⁸ The game, as it stands for people like Ozam and me, is to sort through media representations and glean those elements that can be

426Benjamin, “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,” 231-2.

427See particularly Chapter 15, “The Remediated Self,” in Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding new media*.

428For a more recent anthropological consideration of the proliferation of strangers, particularly in the Mexican context, see Bartra, “Culturas líquidas en la tierra baldía.”

appropriated for stitching together an always partial and tenuous portrayal of oneself.

Speaking for Nations and Minorities

The civil rights activist Reverend Jesse Jackson was recorded in *The New York Times* as responding to the issuing of the Memín Pingüín stamps by saying, "Comedy masks tragedy [...] In this instance, it's comedy with a demeaning punch line and we would hope that President Fox will take [them] off the market."⁴²⁹ The tragedy that he referred to, of course, is that of slavery and the institutionalized and informal racism that has often interpolated blacks as second class citizens. Among the important gains of the African-American Civil Rights Movement in the United States is that many denigrating portrayals of blacks are no longer tolerated. The situation was such that the Bush White House also felt compelled to issue a statement. Even though the stamps are "an internal issue for Mexico and the postal authorities that issued the stamp," it recognized, "Racial stereotypes are offensive no matter what their origin. The Mexican government needs to consider this. Images like these have no place in today's world."⁴³⁰

What complicates this case is that African-Americans are not the only group who has a historical grievance against the United States. Mexicans still resent that the US invaded their country and wrested over half of their territory away during the nineteenth century. They resent also the economic, political and cultural power that their northern neighbors continue to exert over them. Furthermore, Mexicans also continue to suffer racism at the hands of Americans. A spokesperson for the Mexican Ambassador to the United States responded to the White House's statement by referring to an American cartoon that figures an anthropomorphic Mexican mouse. "Just as Speedy Gonzalez has never been interpreted in a racial manner by people in Mexico, because he is a cartoon character, I am certain that this commemorative postage stamp is not intended to be interpreted on a racial basis in Mexico or anywhere else."⁴³¹ In other words—Get the beam out of your own eyes Americans, before you start looking for a mote in ours.

President Fox, when asked to comment on the affair, played to popular sentiments. "We are now putting Memín Pingüín on stamps, he is a character that is really popular, loved, but unfortunately the United States did not like that we put him on stamps. At any rate, we are very proud of Memín Pingüín."⁴³² The comic book character became an occasion for reaffirming Mexican national pride through a collective thumbing of Mexican noses at the United States and moralizing African-American leaders. The assistant marketing director for the Mexican Postal Service went as far as to say that Memín Pingüín embodies Mexican national character. "His mischievous nature is part of that character." According to this line of reasoning, if Mexicans were laughing, they were laughing at themselves. And if "comedy masks tragedy," as Jackson declared, then the tragedy being masked was that suffered by Mexicans who like the black child in the comic are discriminated against, misunderstood and criticized.

This might have been a rhetorical win of sorts for Mexican officials and the majority of commentators south of the border if it had not been that people on both sides began to recall that

⁴²⁹Jr, "New Racial Gaffe in Mexico; This Time It's a Tasteless Stamp Set."

⁴³⁰Malkin, "Fight Grows Over a Stamp U.S. Sees as Racist and Mexico Adores."

⁴³¹Fears, "Mexican Stamps Racist, Civil Rights Leaders Say"; Universal, "Tacha Casa Blanca de racista estampilla de Memín."

⁴³²Ruiz, "Fox compara a Frida Kahlo con Memín."

Mexico too has a black population, even if it is relatively small.⁴³³ As discussions of national belonging often are, this became one of relatively majorities and minorities. Some activists and scholars who were sympathetic to the cause of black communities in Mexico, particularly along the gulf and Pacific coasts, saw the occasion as an opportunity to forward the claims and grievances of Afro-Mexicans.

Important here, is that all these spokespersons, whether for national governments or minority groups, never sat down together to discuss the stamp incident. No delegates were sent. No meetings were convened. All these spokespersons were content to register their respective arguments through media. Jesse Jackson was quoted, the Bush White House made its statement, and President Fox and his officials responded. That is the incident was limited mostly to the realm of media.

Negotiating Belonging for Oneself

If there was ever anything like a silent majority, today majorities and minorities have become much more noisy. Practically anyone, in the more developed countries, can give expression to their opinions, if not in newspapers, in film and television, in polls and on the Internet. Ozam and I too felt that we had to speak, and we did so by searching out multiple opinions on the matter, sharing them with each other, and clarifying our positions in writing by email.

What made our disagreement so surprising was that Ozam and I had established a bond between us based on our sense of marginality. He spoke to me about the difficulties he experienced growing up in the center of Mexico City to a Syrian father and a first generation Lebanese-Mexican mother. According to his own account, he was misunderstood as much by his father, who wanted him to assume his own national identity, as by his more squarely Mexican peers and friends. I commiserated with him by sharing accounts of my own, like one about my grade-school classmates making fun of my pronunciation of some words in English even though I had spoken the language all my life.

It is because we became so close over the course of my research and during subsequent visits of mine to Mexico City, that I can claim that it was a parallel frailty in each of us that pushed us to seek each other out, find something in common between us by which we could establish a bond. It was also this frailty, however, that made it so necessary for us to disagree concerning the Memín Pingüín stamps. It was the bigger possibility of belonging the tugged and the smaller belonging that we built between us. I cite Ramos above, because he clearly saw how the most patriotic defenses of one's compatriots, as those that Ozam and I made to each other, can arise out of weakness. I cite Paz, because he saw that this weakness, this feeling of being alone in the world and needing to stand with others, as with one's nation, is a widespread experience.

Conclusion

There is a tendency to give the Internet and new media too much credit for making possible the mediated lives some of us live today. I began with a reflection by Benjamin on writing and film in order to suggest that what is occurring with digital communication technologies today is but a

⁴³³For an exposition of race in Mexico, see Lewis, "Blacks, Black Indians, Afromexicans: The dynamics of race, nation, and identity in a Mexican moreno community (Guerrero)."

continuation of a much older development. For example, readers of magazines and newspapers had already become accustomed to the shorter and more direct modular texts that now have been proliferated by the Internet. It could also be argued that blogs had an antecedent in self-published and informally distributed “zines” produced by photocopy machines. Regardless of the specifics of this history, however, it is abundantly clear that what Benjamin identified as modern individual's propensity to “lay claim” to being reproduced through media has only intensified over the past century. I submit that it is in these mediated, even hypermediated spaces that many of us increasingly live our solitude. It is also in these spaces too where we reach out, hoping to build bonds of solidarity.

Chapter X: Dirty Realism and Markets

The twentieth century developmentalist project in Mexico began to fall apart beginning in the late 1960s. One consequence of this is that writers, who up to that time had been closely tied to the state, began to be more openly critical of the official party. This critical freedom, was in part purchased by the heroic work of independent minded intellectuals by a greater dependence on the market old tropes of Mexican national character are used by writers in a way that does not contribute to national imaginings. The writers I worked with for the failure of developmentalism in Mexico. I have done this by analyzing how the tropes of Mexican national character have been transformed will contextualize what I have set out to accomplish in this dissertation by contrasting my approach with that of Diana Palaversich, a literary critic. Palaversich, in 2005, published a book on “postmodern” Latin American literature.⁴³⁴ She has also studied and written extensively on contemporary Mexican fiction. In one article, she takes to task two of the authors who appear in this dissertation: Guillermo Fadanelli and Rogelio Villarreal. Palaversich criticizes two volumes of short stories, one by each of these writers, for what she sees as their inability to transcend retrograde misogynist sexual norms. She actively situates this genre of Mexican literature in a hierarchy, placing it at a lower rank than the literature of more developed countries. Instead of playing gatekeeper, as an anthropologist I have put forward an understanding of these writers as not only reflecting, but more importantly *reflecting on* a situation whereby Mexicans find themselves continually inscribed in an inferior position vis-à-vis more privileged Mexicans and people from the United States and Europe.

It would be a mistake to take too literally Palaversich's critique of Guillermo and Rogelio. As she points out, she approaches their writing in “an ironic and sometimes vitriolic manner, affording them the same treatment that [Mexican] dirty realists apply to female protagonists in their works.”⁴³⁵ Since her criticism hinges on a turning of the tables, using her cosmopolitan position to shame these Mexican writers for their misogynistic attitudes, it is somewhat disingenuous to turn around and take her to task for reinscribing the positional superiority she uses as a critic. If I persist in doing this, however, it is only because her “ironic and sometimes vitriolic manner” makes even more evident the game of critique that is present not only in her other works but in the field of literary criticism more generally.

Before elaborating further on the positional game that Palaversich plays and pointing out what she misses by doing so, I first will summarize her principle argument. It is not the sexism of Guillermo and Rogelio that she takes issue with. Sexism, she considers, “like racism and classism, is an incurable disease.” What she finds deplorable is that their “*machismo* is passé and retrograde.” As everyone knows, Mexican men are sexists; what she criticizes is that these authors have done nothing creative with sexism and merely reproduce the most lamentable and overused tropes of Mexican machismo. She criticizes “the poverty of the authors' erotic imagination and their incapacity to liberate themselves from the mental constructs of a folkloric Latin American machismo that contaminates their works with worn clichés.”

⁴³⁴Palaversich, *De Macondo a McOndo*.

⁴³⁵Palaversich, “Las trampas del sexo. Dos caras del realismo sucio.” Since I am drawing on an Internet version of this article, there are no page numbers. All subsequent quotes in this conclusion, unless otherwise indicated, are from this reference.

Palaversich, in her critique of incipient literary sexism, is spot on. It is not only that Guillermo and Rogelio, as with so many Latin American writers, reproduce trite macho fantasies and clichés, but they express in their writing the workings of homophobic Mexican masculinity. “Admitting to having sexual problems, or having a small penis appears to be a taboo so strong in Mexico that writers do not even dare transgress it in fiction.” Palaversich writes, “the penises that are erected [sic] in the heart of Mexican dirty realist narrative are always hard, rigid, pulsating and function marvelously. Anxiety and insecurity about one's body is attributed exclusively to women.”

What makes their adherence to this misogynistic script that much more unacceptable is that they are so assiduous, in the spirit of Henry Miller and Charles Bukowski, in their transgressing of other taboos. The list of taboos they transgress include:

having sex with a dead girlfriend: the perfect women who does not speak; having sex with one's daughters: the secret dream of every father; tying up a woman, hitting her, having sex with her and snuffing out a cigarette on her—without a doubt—perfect ass; having sex with a prostitute and a dog: after all they are the same thing; and the last and most important, being that it is the one that figures most often in the accounts, having anal sex.

Especially in light of the last taboo, it is remarkable, notes Palaversich, that with the exception of two lesbian scenes, each of which is described in only two lines, all the rest are heterosexual.

It seems that for the Mexican author it is easier to transgress the taboos, known 'scientifically' as necrophilia, incest, sadism, bestiality, than the taboo of homosexuality, which unlike the others is commonly practiced [...] This impossibility to challenge the taboo on homosexuality—the most terrible monster of Mexican masculine identity—demonstrates that no matter how radical they consider themselves, Fadanelli and Villareal [sic] subscribe to the mainstream of Mexican heterosexual normativity.

Although Palaversich's critique of the misogyny of Mexican authors is necessary, these works can not be reduced to their sexual politics. In the lead-in to her review, Palaversich brackets many elements that may have otherwise been considered. Most relevant is her concession that she actually enjoyed reading the two short story collections. They “entertained me and I read them in one sitting,” she writes. “In particular,” she enjoyed “the stories by Fadanelli: his agile and colloquial narration; the ironic voice; the surprising twists that some accounts take.” After the glosses that I have given in this dissertation of Mexican masculinity as diagnosed by Ramos and Paz, and after my review of the dirty realism of Servín and Yépez, it should come as no surprise to the reader that Guillermo and Rogelio do not escape a certain sexist and homophobic perspective.

Besides reminding us that there is such a thing as Mexican homophobic masculine norms that continue to be reproduced in literature, Palaversich's critique serves to locate these two collections at a distance from the bleeding edge of world literature. Apparently, it is still the case that the greatest value in literature is innovation and novelty. “Misogyny and machismo would not bother me much if they came packaged in innovative wrappings,” Palaversich writes. The Australian dirty realist novel that she uses as a critical counterpoint, *Praise* by Andrew

McGahan, published nearly a decade before the reviewed Mexican works, is of better literary quality because it does not hesitate to play more fully with sexual taboos. Here I would recall the article in *Chilango* magazine about the new vogue in loft-styled apartments in Mexico City that I refer to in Chapter IV. As evidently occurs with architectural innovation, Palaversich tells us, “truly original” literature is produced elsewhere than Mexico City, even in Australia.

Most noteworthy, Palaversich celebrates the self-deprecating attitude of the protagonists in the Australian work. “Both of them [Gordon and Cynthia] are completely passive and let life and luck carry them in arbitrary directions.” Theirs is “an existence in which nothing and nobody is taken seriously, including oneself.” They spend most of the time unemployed, living on welfare, spending the little money they have on alcohol and drugs. Furthermore, at 23 years they are falling apart physically, a condition mirrored in their seedy surroundings. All of this is evidence, for Palaversich, of the work's literary value:

Praise, written in a style dominated by black humor, masterfully captures those spaces defined as abject by prosperous society. The indifference, disinterest and lethargy that govern the life of the characters of this novel goes against the hegemonic discourse of the moment that celebrates competition and aggressiveness, while their careless and decadent physical appearance dismantles the exigencies of obligatory beauty. For Gordon and Cynthia, acid, heroin and sex provide an escape from the tedium and tyranny of middle-class ethics and aesthetics.

According to Palaversich, the Australian work of dirty realism is better than the Mexican ones because, unlike the latter, the former is able to work against middle-class values. “This demarcation between bourgeois and anti-bourgeois does not occur in the texts by Fadanelli and Villareal [sic] written as they are from the *habitus* of the affluent classes.” Palaversich's literary critique can be reduced to this: the short story collections by Guillermo and Fadanelli are inferior literary works because in their inability to escape Mexican homophobic masculine norms they reflect their general inability to say anything that escapes the well-worn paths of the mainstream middle class.

What Palaversich fails to reveal, though, is that the self-deprecating humor and criticism of “hegemonic” values that she celebrates in the Australian novel are a mainstream consumer attitude in Mexico. This is what I argued in Chapter IV. Enrique Soto, the editor of *Chilango* magazine, adopts an “ironic” and self-deprecating tone for his publication precisely because it sells in Mexico City. In celebrating the Australian novel, she is not so much revealing its qualities as revealing the position she assumes. As Bourdieu taught, by making judgments of taste one situates oneself. In her critique, Palaversich not only puts Guillermo and Rogelio's collections on an inferior literary plane than the Australian work, but in doing so situates herself as a privileged cosmopolitan literary consumer.

The taboos that the Mexican authors seek to transgress, she argues, were already transgressed by authors in the United States almost half a century ago. There is no point in challenging the conservative values that some Mexicans might still have because “the real readers of dirty realism are those of us who have few barriers and few taboos.” Through her judgments as a literary critic, Palaversich participates in defining a consumer niche that values innovation over

entertainment.

Fabulating Consumers

The philosopher Gilles Deleuze claimed that the “the ultimate aim of literature is... this invention of a people, the possibility of a life.” He calls this function of literature, fabulation.⁴³⁶ My research problem has been to explore how, given the tradition of Mexican national character studies, writers in Mexico City invent lives reflective of contemporary situations. Although I begin with the state-led nationalist project, which reached its climax some time mid-twentieth century, I end by showing that it is with respect to markets that lifestyles are increasingly defined.

David H. Walker gives a short history of how fiction in France, since the eighteenth century, has participated in imagining the character of contemporary consumers. “The consumer vision,” writes Walker, “consists of things cut off from their productive roots; and the commodified visual display leaves the spectator cut off in turn from the reality thereby elided.”⁴³⁷ It may be counterintuitive, or run against common sense, but capitalist development works against materialism.⁴³⁸

Walker illustrates this point with the example of furniture. In Honoré de Balzac's collection *The Human Comedy*, the novels are cluttered with home furnishings. “In the Ancien Régime, a well-ordered society asserted its hierarchical structure through the harmony and ‘convenance’ of its people’s furnishings, and its continuity was guaranteed as its furniture was transmitted from one generation to another.” By the time that André Gide wrote *Les Nourritures terrestres* at the end of the nineteenth century, what counted most about furniture was their pristine newness. “In contrast with what we see in Balzac, we note, then, that economic agents (what used to be called people) are driven constantly to replace possessions, experiences or accessories, which wear out unacceptably in use, with new ones.” The “narratives of the individuals in the consumer society tend to be characterized by progressive detachment from their possessions.”⁴³⁹

It has been my argument that this dynamic is at work also with another object of fiction, the nation. The “solitary hero” who makes his way through “a sociological landscape... a world of plurals” that Anderson describes as the emblematic form of the nationalist novel, evokes the *flâneur* making his way through French arcades and department stores. Commodities, in their plurality, also “conjure up a social space full of comparable [things], none in itself of any unique importance, but all representative (in their simultaneous, separate existence).”⁴⁴⁰ As Walker writes, “This discourse of consumerism is thus metonymic... The customer has access to the totality via the purchase of one part of it.”⁴⁴¹ In this sense, nationalist novels are consumer novels where the commodity for sale is a sense of national belonging. Like consumers who purchase their participation in the world of goods through the purchase and consumption of merchandise, so the nationalist novelist offers readers the nation through the consumption of national

436Deleuze, *Essays critical and clinical*, 5.

437Walker, “Shopping and Fervour: Modern literature and the consumer society,” 34.

438On this point Walker cites Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing modern democracy*.

439Walker, “Shopping and Fervour: Modern literature and the consumer society,” 35, 36.

440Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflecting on the origin and spread of nationalism*, 30, 32.

441Walker, “Shopping and Fervour: Modern literature and the consumer society,” 38.

narratives.

Praise, the Australian novel Palaversich uses as critical counterpoint, then, is not exactly what she presents it as. She writes: “The indifference, disinterest and lethargy that govern the life of the characters of this novel goes against the hegemonic discourse of the moment that celebrates competition and aggressiveness, while their careless and decadent physical appearance dismantles the exigencies of obligatory beauty.” What she does not recognize, however, is that instead of standing apart from the development of bourgeois consumerism, “the indifference, disinterest and lethargy” only mark one possible mode that adheres to the overall logic of capitalist development. Even ugliness gets valorized as an alternative product to beauty. It may be that the protagonists of this novel may shun sanctioned ways of participating in capitalist production and accumulation, but regardless their attitude is in keeping with consumerism as a process of “progressive detachment from... possessions.” Alcohol and drugs, in contrast to furniture, provide a more perfect model for the commodity in second-phase modernized consumerism. They are acquired not to be possessed but for the immediate experience they provide.

Palaversich is not completely critical of Mexican literature. She has favorably reviewed the writer, Mario Bellatín.⁴⁴² Unlike Guillermo and Rogelio, she considers Bellatín innovative. In placing a critical emphasis on innovation, she does little more than push forward a consumer logic that Walker has described as a product of nineteenth century French literature. In this case, it is not furniture, but the novel itself that is valued for its newness. In her literary critiques, Palaversich offers her readers a way of becoming more discriminating in their literary consumption. As far as contemporary Mexican literature is concerned, among the best is Bellatín; less valuable, she tells us, are the works by Guillermo and Rogelio.

The Marginal Contemporary Urgency of Writing

To close, I draw on another negative critique written by a writer who belongs to the group with which I conducted my research. Although Rubén Bonet reviews a novel by one of his own colleagues, Juan Manuel Servín, his criticisms are no less severe than that which Palaversich directed toward Guillermo and Rogelio, both of who are also his associates. Palaversich argues that the authors have failed to escape the sexist and homophobic taboos of Mexican mainstream masculinity. Rubén identifies Servín's failure, in his novel, as not moving beyond the common places of “adolescent” masculine fantasies. In both cases, the harshest criticism is that these works lack originality. As Rubén argues, Servín's writing shows an “alarming lack... of new ideas, or to put it more cruelly... of having anything novel to say.”⁴⁴³

In lamenting that Guillermo and Rogelio were not able to reproduce in their works the “indifference, disinterest, and lethargy,” the self-doubting mode of other dirty realist fiction, Palaversich ignores the whole tradition of Mexican national character studies. What better examples of self-deprecation than Ramos and Paz diagnosis of Mexicans, and thus themselves, as inherently plagued by feelings of worthlessness and solitude? What she misses is that Mexicans, perhaps unlike Australians, begin from a position of lack and positional inferiority vis-à-vis

⁴⁴²Palaversich, “Apuntes para una lectura de Mario Bellatín.”

⁴⁴³Bonet, “¿Y dónde quedó el autor? Al final del vacío,” 5.

males from other countries. She is right to point out that these authors reinforce a mainstream masculinity, but ignores that this masculinity is a response, in as far as Ramos and Paz are correct, to a reality whereby many Mexican men continue to find themselves on the margins of an inaccessible modernity. It is one thing for an Australian male to flaunt the values of a “modern” nation to which he belongs and quite another for a Mexican male to be asked to do so when he is unsure whether or not it is even possible for him to live or embody “modernity” at all.

Rubén understands this. In writing about Servín, he gives a description that could be a character analysis of Mexican writers in general:

nihilist intellectual, marginal, condemned to occupy the lowest positions of the social and economic scale, poor and coming from the least privileged social stratas but strangely and particularly well educated, beaten by life... only to convert that experience into a pulpit from which to spit moral superiority and torment the conscience of readers, as if social resentment had any intrinsic value.⁴⁴⁴

Here he is deliberately confusing a description of Servín's model for an anti-hero with Servín's “alter ego”. Rubén's critique is post-Mexican. Even though he knows that in recalling “resentment” he is invoking a national trope, he does so not to speak about Mexicans in general but in order to criticize his colleagues' performance. Resentment, like all other elements of the so-called Mexican national character, is now more than ever a matter of individual responsibility.

The protagonist making his way through a post-apocalyptic Mexico City in Servín's *Al final del vacío* is a Mexican version of a second-phase modern individual. “The incredible thing is that in this scene made up of burnt out buildings, barricades, looted stores, hungry hordes, rapes and assassinations, the protagonist, like a video game player who only needs to click on objects to obtain them, always finds exactly what he needs.” He stumbles onto food, alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, new clothes, prostitutes, and even gets to ride through the city in a convertible.⁴⁴⁵ Even so, Rubén chides Servín for excluding the Internet from his novel, as if it was representing a 1980s version of a future apocalypse. “Are there not Internet cafés in the center of Mexico City—and in any medium sized city anywhere in the Republic—since over a decade ago?”

What Rubén does not realize, or maybe that is precisely his point, is that Servín is reproducing a third world version of the reality lived during contemporary second-phase modernization. It is not the future he invokes, but the present, a city with high unemployment, zones of exception where the government exercises little or no lawful authority, where the most effective way to obtain merchandise is through extortion, theft, and violence. One point that Rubén fails to mention is the quality of interpersonal relationships in the novel, which could also be compared to those portrayed in video games. The entire novel is constructed around the narrative tension created by two separated lovers. But even in this case we are led to understand that their attachment to each other is of no greater value than the loose attachment they have to things. At the end of the novel the protagonist sleeps with his lover and then kills her. This is meant to remind us that it is not people or things but the experience that people and things provide which is important to consumers in this period of second-phase modernization. Excluding the Internet from his account, Servín furthermore demonstrates that such an attitude is not, as it is so often

⁴⁴⁴Ibid., 6.

⁴⁴⁵Ibid., 5-6.

portrayed, determined by the use of the most recent communication technologies.

Modernization demands, as it always has, that the older ways be revised, reformed, and repurposed for new circumstances. This is what writers in Mexico City are attempting to achieve in the realm of thought and the imaginary. The difference between writers in Mexico City and those in New York, Paris, and London, is that the former are working in a context where the objectives of first-phase modernization, in particular the establishment of a welfare state and the overcoming of gross discrepancies in inequality, were never attained. This, however, has not prevented the adoption of a second-phase of modernization whereby the state speaks less for the supposed nation, and individuals are more detached from place, things, and others. One example of this detachment, which I mentioned in Chapter IV, is that writers living in Mexico City most often set their fiction somewhere else.

In Chapter II, I introduce post-Mexicanness as a play between bourgeois cosmopolitanism and a disenchantment with particularly leftist politics. In Chapter III, I suggest that published writing in Mexico City—the upbeat articles of consumer lifestyle magazines as well as dreary apocalyptic literature—is a response to the failure of the mid-twentieth century economic “miracle” and the nationalist project that legitimized it. In Chapter IV, I turn specifically to literature about Mexico City, and discuss how both grim and upbeat representations of the city play to different consumer niches. In Chapter V, I demonstrate through the narratives of two novels how the tropes from the Mexican national character studies get reworked in order to fit a situation where individuals must more fully assume responsibility for their lives. In Chapter VI, I analyse Mexico City writers, suggesting that the insecurity that they have often attributed to Mexicans in general is also a reflection of their own literary insecurity in the international world of letters. In Chapter VII, I describe how the state has withdrawn from its active role of coordinating intellectual and cultural production in Mexico, and how writers have increasingly come under the sway of a market logic. In Chapter VIII, by turning to national soccer, I give an example of how the inferior status that has been attributed to Mexico as a nation has become, in this case, an expression of the deficiency of individuals. In Chapter IX, I give an example of the remediation of the nation. Finally, in this conclusion, I turn to two critical reviews of three authors who appear in this research to illustrate how an anthropological analysis of writers differs from a literary critique.

I am not defending the writers and the quality of the literary works that I refer to in this dissertation. Furthermore, only time will tell whether their writing will have an important sociological impact. What I do assert is that these works, in the way that they draw on and rework the tradition of Mexican national character, reflect the contemporary moment in Mexico City. “The question ‘What groups do I belong to?’ can no longer be answered collectively according to pre-given social patterns, but must instead be answered individually with reference to changed probabilities and new stereotypes.”⁴⁴⁶

Through this dissertation I have closely considered the transformation of these probabilities and stereotypes as they appear in writing produced in Mexico City. More important, however, based on my long-term research with writers, I demonstrate that writing continues to be a site from which some individuals reflect on the conditions of their lives. The ideal of a decision-making

446Beck, Bonss, and Lau, “The theory of reflexive modernization - Problematic, hypotheses and research programme,” 24.

subject continues to be preserved. It is because of this that chronicle and fiction, although marginalized by the state and market, continue to provide the means by which to reflect on the choices available to individuals. After the failure of import-substitution industrialization in the 1970s, and the subsequent retreated by the state as a major promoter of national cultural production, the future from Mexico City appears increasingly in the form of what international markets promise individuals. Both the celebratory prose of the new urban lifestyle magazines, as well as the dreary pessimism of dirty realist novels, no matter what else they do, address the reality of that particular peripheral metropolis, reworking the old Mexican national character tropes for new forms of modern urban living.

Chapter XI: Conclusion

In this dissertation I have drawn from three sources, works from the canon of Mexican national character studies, interviews conducted over a period of a year and a half with writers in Mexico City, and the works of these writers. My project was to trace how tropes of so-called Mexican national character have changed over the past forty years. From very early on in my fieldwork I became convinced that these works contained within themselves adequate frameworks of analysis and that the best thing for me to do was to work through them on their own terms. What remains to be done, and what I set out to do in this conclusion, is to frame my findings within a broader anthropological project of investigation.

In this respect, I would situate my research within a genealogy that uses anthropological tools both to “study up”, and to “anthropologize the West”.⁴⁴⁷ The subjects of this research have been the producers in what has been referred to as the culture industry in Mexico City. As writers and intellectuals they play a key role in the generation and distribution of ideas. Furthermore, they inhabit an ideal position from which to “make strange”, and therefore to reflect on, the role of writers more generally in the contemporary world. These authors are both fully part of the Western intellectual tradition, even part of an important cultural center in the hemisphere, at the same time they are continually positioned at its margins. This play between center and periphery is at the very heart of definitions of Mexican national character. Furthermore, as I have argued, it defines the problem space for writers in Mexico City today as they reflect on their position in a globalized world.

Even as I turn to studies of Mexican character, this investigation does not concern an ethnic or national identity per se. I have been less interested in what writings about Mexicans tell us about Mexicans in general than what they can reveal about the role of writers in Mexico City and the state of writing as a reflective practice. In other words, this has not been a study of culture as commonly understood. Rather it is a critique of culture as an intellectual product shot through by power relations.⁴⁴⁸ Moreover, more than with culture itself, this study begins with and ends with constructions of the self, particularly as it is thought in relation to others.⁴⁴⁹

A Tripartite Heuristic

I will introduce here a distinction that will serve as a heuristic. I adopt it in very rough terms from Michel Foucault. He has suggested that experience can be separated into a “domain of knowledge, a type of normativity, and a mode of relation to the self.”⁴⁵⁰ In this project, I have attempted to touch on all three aspects. However, as can be gathered from looking at Foucault’s own work, depending on the phenomenon studied and approach taken, not all aspects will be stressed equally.

This dissertation, as I have already suggested, is not a study of Mexicans as a population or national group. There is a vast literature extending across the human sciences in which Mexicans

447Nader, “Up the Anthropologist-Perspectives gained from studying up”; Rabinow, *Anthropos Today*.

448Nader, “Controlling Processes,” 721.

449Rabinow, “Midst Anthropology’s Problems,” 76.

450Foucault, “Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume Two,” 200.

figure as object of research.⁴⁵¹ In this dissertation, however, I have only drawn on a few exemplary works. Mexican national character as a “domain of knowledge” is pertinent here to the degree that it is also mobilized as a norm, and as such constitutes the relevant context within which writers in Mexico City re-think themselves and their relationship to others.

Although I have not been explicit about this up until now, this project cannot be appropriately understood except in relation to the work of my mentors Laura Nader and Paul Rabinow. In recognizing the extent to which their approaches to anthropology inform my research, however, I do not wish to make them in anyway responsible for the weaknesses and failures of this project. On the other hand, my goal in this conclusion is to present my results in relation to their work.

Principally, I am inspired both by an anthropology of power, particularly one that brings economic issues to the fore, and an anthropology of modes of subject formation. That is, my own analysis of how Mexican national character served particular class and group interests, was used by the state to legitimize its project of national development, and has been subjected to the logic of niche markets for particular kinds of cultural products, should be understood in relation to Nader’s interest in social and cultural control. Furthermore, my focus on literary form and writing as a practice of thought that can be used to mediate dissonant contemporary situations for would-be modern subjects can only be understood with regard to Rabinow’s that takes up the subject.

Knowledge: Mexican character as research object

As I have suggested in the Introduction, Mexican may produce national character studies long after writers in the United States and Europe have abandoned them because until recently there has not been reliable opinion polls. As the anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz has pointed out, it has been up to intellectuals, and particularly writers, to interpret the character of Mexicans by whatever ad-hoc and mostly interpretive methods available to them. The statistics that were produced, he writes, served “to create a mystique of modernity that would help secure a place for Mexico in the concert of nations.”⁴⁵² The same could be said about the national character studies themselves.

The two most prominent tomes in the Mexican national character literature are those written by Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz, respectively. As I have glossed his argument, Ramos claimed that Mexicans were defined by a sense of worthlessness that arose in them by comparing themselves with other more fully developed or modern individuals. Similarly Paz wrote of the masks that Mexicans used to hide the profound solitude they felt as a result of their marginality to modernity.

What I want to stress here is that no matter what the formulation is, the studies of Mexican national character portray Mexicans as a group in terms of a lack that they presumably share, or the marginality that is supposed to be common to them. As I have pointed out, the basis for projecting national unity in these works is the expectation that development, whether political, economic, cultural, or psychological, will, someday, provide the ground for a fully realized nation like those imagined to exist in Europe and the United States.

451For an anthology of that literature see Bartra, *Anatomía del mexicano*.

452Lomnitz-Adler, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*, 205.

Now that reliable data is being produced with respect to the opinions of Mexicans, national character studies are losing some of their former importance. Over the period for which data is available, what they reveal is that in recent years Mexicans are becoming more divided and identities more regional. However, Mexico has always been a sharply divided country. What has changed is that, after the failure of developmentalism to fulfill the expectations that it helped feed, both in the guise of import substitution industrialization and the liberalization of markets, there is even less a basis upon which to imagine the formation of the would-be Mexican national subject.

Power: Nationalism as normative system

In his introduction to his anthology of works on Mexican national character, the anthropologist Roger Bartra reproduces an argument that has become widely accepted among Mexican intellectuals, namely that the tropes of national character were used by the official party (PRI) to legitimize its monopoly on state power.⁴⁵³ As the argument goes, the official national ideology was meant to inspire among Mexicans a faith in their own exceptionality, and the incomparable historic and natural wealth of their country, so that they would be better able to endure hardship and the authoritarianism, corruption, and abuses of the state.

One way to flesh out this argument, something that Bartra and other Mexican intellectuals do not do, is through literature. I have done some of that work in this dissertation. The problem for nationalists has always been to educate the sentiments of a population in order that they feel drawn together and identify with each other. To this end fiction can play a role. For example, romantic relationships as portrayed in literature, especially those that bridge racial or class divides, could serve as allegories for the nation.⁴⁵⁴ Or perhaps even more frequently, national works of literature were used to provoke the compassion of readers for the plight of “compatriots” for whom they might not otherwise identify.⁴⁵⁵

Put in this light, writers of fiction have been important players in what has been called the fourth division of state power in Mexico, the “culture industry”. And it is through the canonization of a national literature, and through the assigning of readings through public schooling that these works get invoked into a state project of establishing norms of sentiment and behavior. The Mexican Miracle was successful on a cultural plane largely because it is linked to a dramatic expansion of the public school system beginning after the Mexican Revolution in the 1920s. The Mexican Miracle was possible because there was an army of intellectuals, beholden to the state, who labored to elaborate and disseminate its ideological components, a nationalism founded on the belief in developmentalism.

To put this in other terms, the social apparatuses of control that had been put into place, particularly during the Porfirio Díaz administration, extending from the 1870s to 1910, were bolstered by new cultural apparatuses in the 1930s and 1940s. Ostensibly these cultural apparatuses of control proved to be effective because they appropriated the rhetoric of the Mexican Revolution as well as addressed some of the grievances that had fed the unrest.⁴⁵⁶ The

453Bartra, “Prólogo.”

454Irwin, “Introduction: The hidden vices of los Hijos de la Chingada”; Sommer, *Foundational Fictions*.

455Vogel, “Review: Foundational Fictions: The national romances of Latin America.”

456Mallon, *Peasant and nation*.

Mexican Miracle certainly had an economic aspect, specifically the policy of import substitution industrialization, but it could be argued that the level of state intervention that this policy demanded were possible only to the extent that the national-cultural project was successful.

Subject Formation: Resentment as personal choice

“Modernity has not vanished, but it is becoming increasingly problematic,” write Ulrich Beck, Wolfgang Bonss, and Cristoph Lau. “While crises, transformation and radical social change have always been part of modernity, the transition to a reflexive second modernity not only changes social structures but revolutionizes the very coordinates, categories and conceptions of change itself.”⁴⁵⁷ One way to conceptualize the shift between what these authors call first- and second-wave modernization, is in terms of the nation-state. The so-called welfare state, by this model, was a product of first-wave modernization. The dismantling of the welfare state is one effect of the second-wave.

The Mexican Miracle was an emblematic first-wave phenomenon. Beginning in the 1930s, the Mexican state presented itself as the shepherd of modernization, as the only legitimate actor with the breadth and means to usher in modernity for all Mexicans. As I have repeatedly argued in this dissertation, today the state is perceived more as a corrupt and inept actor that has stood in the way of progress than one that has brought it about.

What makes Mexico a unique case for the model provided by Beck et.al. is that it has transitioned to a species of second-wave modernization without having realized the principles, to the degree of other OECD countries, of the first-wave. That is, in Mexico, what is being experienced is not so much a breakdown of a “full employment society” as an attempt to re-legitimize the modernization project on alternative foundations. Moreover, after the dramatic failure of neoliberal reforms to deliver on promises of providing better living conditions for Mexicans on the whole in the 1980s and 1990s, the state is at pains to justify its exercise of power. As I have written, it appears that the current war on drugs aims at providing the legitimization that the modernization and developmentalist discourses no longer do.

What concerns us here, though, are the implications that these changes have for the lives of contemporary individuals. As Beck et.al. put it, “Second-modernity individuals haven’t sufficient reflective distance on themselves to construct linear and narrative biographies.” Further down, I will come back to this assertions and venture how it is linked to the above assertion concerning the nation-state. All that needs to be said, at this point, is that second-modern would-be subjects are constituted through a combination of relatively short-term interests and projects.⁴⁵⁸ Moreover, because of this, choice figures centrally into the constitution of many contemporary individuals, in a way that differentiates them from those of previous generations.

As Nader has argued, particularly with respect to women and breast implants, an anthropology that concerns itself with analyzing power demonstrates that choice is at best constrained. At one point she has even gone as far as to write that “choice is an illusion.”⁴⁵⁹ This conclusion, though,

457Beck, Bonss, and Lau, “The theory of reflexive modernization - Problematic, hypotheses and research programme,” 2.

458Scott Lasch as cited in Ibid., 23.

459Nader, “Controlling Processes,” 717.

is more a result of the methods than her beliefs. A close look at Nader's work can only reveal that she develops a critique of power as a way of strengthening what could be termed counter-hegemonic choices. The step that must be taken to go from an analysis of power to an analysis that begins with humans as beings which reflect on and modulate their relationships to themselves and others is that which can be seen between Foucault's first volume in his "History of Sexuality," and the second and third volumes.

The anthropology that Rabinow has been proposing is the best equipped for a research project that sets out to study the "optional rules" by which individuals live. I do not want to suggest that power is of no concern, or that second-modernization individuals are less constrained than those of living during the first-wave, but rather that the "increasingly problematic" modernity confronted by many people today is one that presents itself first and foremost as a problem of individual decision. Issues of knowledge and power are placed in proper perspective when the analyst begins and ends with the individual and her choices in the present. In this project the choice centers on what one does in Mexico City with the resentment one feels for still being located on the periphery of modernity.

Problematization

Problematizations are one type of object for the anthropology that Rabinow theorizes. They are objects, whose conceptual contours he has elaborated beginning with Foucault. As he explains, a problematization arises from "a loss of familiarity." Moreover, "that loss, that uncertainty is the result of difficulties in our previous way of understanding, acting, relating."⁴⁶⁰ Following Rabinow, I have constructed this dissertation around a problematization that I call "after the Mexican Miracle". It is one that results from the failures of developmentalism (and the official nationalism to which it is linked) to fulfill the expectations that it helped feed.

During the period extending from the 1940s to the 1970s there was a domain of knowledge, a normative system, and a mode of existence that was articulated together. Although I have gone into greater detail, for the sake of simplicity we could say that the domain of knowledge, which had as its object the character of Mexicans, began to come into question with the publication of Oscar Lewis' "The Children of Sanchez," in which he portrayed poor Mexicans not as expressing a national essence but rather a culture determined by a lack of means. Secondly, the ensuing struggle between the publisher of the book and his allies, and government officials was one of the first that over the subsequent two decades ended up fracturing a system in which intellectuals actively participated in propagating state sanctioned norms. Finally, these developments were linked to broader movements that critically challenged social relations and modes of existence.

Beginning in the 1980s, but particularly gaining momentum with the election of Carlos Salinas de Gortari in 1988, one response to this problematization was what is known as neoliberalism. By adopting "free market" management strategies the state was able to sidestep for a time the difficulties caused it by growing dissent among the ranks of intellectuals. More to the point, however, neoliberal economic policies were embraced under the guise that they would deliver what import substitution industrialization no longer could, namely a basis from which to hope and imagine a better future for Mexicans as a nation. Since these strategies, however, involved

⁴⁶⁰Rabinow, "Midst Anthropology's Problems," 138.

the government withdrawing from controlling the content of cultural products, as in the case of film, television, journalism, and even academic studies, the new hope and promise that the state fomented proved less durable than what had occurred during the Mexican Miracle.

The Zapatista uprising in January, the assassinations of the presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in March and the secretary general José Francisco Ruiz Massieu in September, and particularly the serious economic recession beginning in December 1994 (twelve months after the North American Free Trade agreement went into effect), together marked the end of the honeymoon with neoliberalism in Mexico. In other words, the problematization of life after developmentalism comes to the fore for writers in Mexico City after the Salinas de Gortari administration. What I discovered through my research is that there are two principal responses to the problematization of development: a somber “dirty realist” genre, and an upbeat consumer-oriented copy.

Given the historical context, what was surprising to me is to find that tropes of Mexican national character have not disappeared but are given new life in contemporary literature and journalism. In this dissertation, I have gone to great lengths to demonstrate that contrary to previous iterations, since the 1990s these tropes are being invoked in a way that is postnational. In other words, the writers with whom I worked employ these tropes in ways that no longer invoke a collective identity. Just as important, in their work writers take an agnostic stance with respect to the future. For them an imagined more egalitarian and developed Mexico can no longer be invoked to project community in the present.

What I want to stress here is that the attitude of the writers that I worked with served as an ethical bridge that made this research possible. As Rabinow writes, “The primary task of the analyst is not to proceed directly toward intervention and repair of the situation's discordance.”⁴⁶¹ In this respect my project did not differ from the projects of the writer with whom I worked. Neither they, as novelists and essayist, nor I, as an anthropologist in the tradition that Rabinow describes, were interested in invoking any of the meta-narratives, all dependent on a belief in developmentalism, by which discordance in the present could be resolved. As I will argue below, I was joined together with these writers by a desire to chronicle the present in all its often grisly dissonance. If I am obliged as an anthropologist to do something more than simply chronicle, it is only “to understand and to put forth a diagnosis of ‘what makes these responses,’” dirty realism and celebratory consumerist copy, “‘simultaneously possible.’”⁴⁶²

Chronicle

Drawing on Hayden White, Rabinow theorized his own experiments with chronicle. What draws him to that particular mode is that unlike historical narrative, it is open-ended, without a definite beginning, middle, and end. This makes it particularly appropriate to problematizations. Since the mode of analysis that Rabinow puts forth does not seek to rectify discordant situations, chronicle, as Rabinow has demonstrated, can be adapted to anthropological work. However, it is the relation of chronicle to time more generally that recommends it to an anthropology “of the

⁴⁶¹Ibid.

⁴⁶²Ibid.

recent past and the near future.” Chronicle, by constraints of its form, is “present-oriented.”⁴⁶³

Others have written about the enduring importance that chronicle has had as a genre for Mexican writers.⁴⁶⁴ In this dissertation I have only attempted to draw a distinction between the celebratory chronicle common during the Mexican Miracle and the more sober chronicle of contemporary writers. I have used Salvador Novo, Mexico City's premier chronicler during the Mexican Miracle, as a counterpoint to the writers with whom I worked. As Carlos Monsiváis explains, by imagining that the modernization of Mexico would allow everyone to live the life of luxury and leisure of the elites whose lives he recorded, Novo could trick himself into thinking that he was describing what life would be for all Mexicans in a future utterly modern Mexico City. Novo, according to Monsiváis, was “the last of the urban optimists.”⁴⁶⁵ From the vantage point of the present, writers today appear less naive.

The only consideration I would add to Rabinow's reflections on chronicle is the relation that the form has to the state. On this point, White quoted Hegel. According to the argument, historical narrative as such only appears with the emergence of the state.⁴⁶⁶ The state is both the object of history and the actor that demands history be written as part of its own unfolding. Chronicle, by contrast, is only a “first-order symbolization of temporality,” common in Europe before modern states appeared. I would go as far as to suggest that the peculiar prevalence of chronicle in Mexico is a symptom of the relative weakness of the state during the country's two hundred years of independence. The chronicle of the Mexican Miracle, in “aspiring” to historical narrativity, as White puts it, could be said to express the hegemonic aspirations of the state during this period. Arguably Novo was the most important apologist of the developmentalist regime. Contemporary chroniclers, as I have argued, in positioning themselves against the state refashion their medium as post-statist.

Present-Oriented Writing in Mexico City

Dirty realism, in its fidelity to the present, is much more true to the chronicle form than other contemporary genres. “There is a descriptive zeal in these novels that shows an attitude of respect toward reality. It seems to obey an urgency to simply ‘count the corpses’...” They are less about “collective cause and more matter-of-fact.” What may be disconcerting to the readers habituated to modernist literature is that writers in this realist mode refuse to “associate the crisis with a historical break nor do they insert it in a bigger historical scheme, but rather describe the present as so overwhelming that everything else loses importance.” This privileging of the present, and the chronicler's zeal for description and a mere “first-order symbolization of temporality” may appear to skeptics as a refusal to engage in historical critique. And it is. But this is only because historical critique, in the hands of writers, is so inadequate when confronted with market ideology and the hegemony of visual media.⁴⁶⁷

Dirty realist novels are not only about the marginalized--teenage assassins, the homeless, transvestites--but also about the solitary writer, marginalized in a world saturated by other media.

463Ibid., 80, 135.

464Corona and Jorgensen, *The Contemporary Mexican Chronicle*.

465Monsiváis, “Prólogo,” 9-10.

466White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative discourse and historical representation*, 29.

467Birkenmaier, “Dirty Realism at the End of the Century: Latin American apocalyptic fictions,” 490,493,495,498.

They slow time down, allow the present to fill the entire horizon, “so that the ‘I’ can find itself.” This is the ethical “I”, an “I” that reflects and chooses. But if these authors do this for themselves, they also do it for their readers. These “novels force everyone to take up responsibility vis-à-vis the transmission of experience itself. The problem is, in the case of these texts, not so much one of awareness, but of ordering and judging the information received through the mass media.”⁴⁶⁸

In this dissertation, I have identified two principle modes of contemporary writing in Mexico City. The first is related to the literary genre I am describing, dirty realism. It focuses on chronicling violence and depravity without justification or judgment. Since this mode has been criticized for its failure to take a political stance, I attempt to demonstrate how it arises given the political developments in Mexico since the 1960s. I argue that the best way to understand the conditions for this mode of writing is through the failure of developmentalism to fulfill the expectations for modernity that it helped generate.

The second mode is a more celebratory one. It is an upbeat consumer oriented writing that I study as it appears in urban lifestyle magazines. Both the dirty realist and the upbeat consumer copy is possible because the government no longer controls and censors intellectuals as it did in the 1960s and 1970s. Since the 1980s, to write cynically about Mexico, and to celebrate in writing the increasing possibilities for personal consumption, are both expressions of a relative autonomy from the state that did not exist previously. This independence from state control and the obligation placed upon intellectuals to reproduce a national ideology has been achieved through a shift of terrain from the state to the market. Both dirty realism and upbeat urban lifestyles magazine copy respond to the demands of niche markets.

Final Remarks

As I have shared some of the results from my research over the past year, I have consistently gotten three reactions: 1) “Are conditions really that dreary in Mexico? Isn’t Mexico better off than so many other countries?” 2) “Certainly, by saying that nationalism and developmentalism have failed in Mexico, you are not expressing the beliefs, desires and realities of the vast majority of Mexicans.” And finally, 3) “Are the writers you worked with truly representative of writers in Mexico?” As a way of concluding this dissertation I would like to address these concerns.

One needs only to have casually kept abreast of news from Mexico over the past few years to realize that the country is going through a difficult period. One recent headline reads: “7 mayors charged in Mexico drug cartel probe: Ex-state attorney general, other officials also accused of aiding traffickers.”⁴⁶⁹ For those familiar with Mexican history, the extent to which drug cartels have infiltrated the government is nothing new. What is truly shocking is that between 2006 and 2009 more than 10,800 people have been killed in the war on drugs, government officials, drug kingpins, journalists, and innocent civilians.⁴⁷⁰ Moreover, to the degree that it touches most people's lives, even worse is the economic situation. Dependent as Mexico has become on the

468Ibid., 493, 507.

469Associated Press, “7 mayors charged in Mexico drug probe.”

470Salam, “The Mexican Insurgency.”

United States, the recent recession has resulted in plunging export and petroleum revenues, the closing of US-owned plants, as well as lower levels of remittances by Mexican workers in the US.

Of course, one need not go far to find conditions that are worse. For example, Beatriz Manz has written about the terrible violence and hardship experienced by a community just south of the border in Guatemala. Many of its inhabitants immigrated to Mexico during the 1980s, precisely to escape repression and to take advantage of the relative better living conditions there.⁴⁷¹ The relative positional superiority of Mexico gets played out, for instance, through the racist discrimination that Guatemalans often suffer in Mexico. And like Guatemala, there are a large number of countries around the world that would be considered worse off. However, being a relatively privileged country is only one part of the Mexican national character equation. Even more important, as far as the national character literature is concerned, is the relative positional inferiority that Mexicans experiences with respect to Europeans, Canadians, and Americans.

This brings us to the second reaction. As one interlocutor pointed out, “You are describing merely the conditions and sentiments of a sector of the Mexican bourgeoisie.” This is true, to a point. As I have repeatedly cited, the anthropologist Roger Bartra has called the authors of the works on Mexican national character “orphans of native bourgeois traditions.”⁴⁷² Furthermore, in Chapter VI, I argue that the “inferiority complex” that these writers attribute to Mexicans on the whole may be nothing more than a projection of the insecurity that they felt in a country with a relatively reduced and marginalized bourgeoisie. In describing the class ethos of writers, however, I have linked it to larger political, economic and cultural developments. Particularly, the growing estrangement between the state and intellectuals beginning in the 1960s can only be appropriately understood as a symptom of the difficulty the state confronted in managing the expectations that it helped foster with regard to national development..

However, these unfulfilled expectations are certainly not limited to intellectuals or the bourgeoisie. As revealed in an opinion poll covering the period from 2004-2008 by the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, nearly 50% of Mexicans would go to live in another country if they had the means. In terms of nationalism, the survey found “there is a significant change in the map of collective identities among the public... Mexico has become more heterogeneous and diverse nation in which the hometown or local area have advanced as an identification space to the detriment of the nation... These trends give reason to believe that regional gaps in identity are widening rapidly.”⁴⁷³ In other words, the refusal of writers to invoke a national collective, as I have described, may correlate to a more widespread phenomenon by which Mexicans are less likely to identify themselves as part of the Mexican nation.

Do these findings mean that writers and other intellectuals are influencing the opinions and feelings of Mexicans, or are they simply capturing and magnifying popular sentiments? This question, unfortunately, is beyond the scope of this project. What this research does reveal is a certain atrophy of the collective imagination among writers, as it regards Mexicanness, nationalism, and developmentalism. “After the Mexican Miracle” is a problem space for

⁴⁷¹Manz, *Paradise in ashes*.

⁴⁷²Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and metamorphosis in the Mexican character*, 122.

⁴⁷³González González, Martínez i Coma, and Schiavon, *Mexico, the Americas and the World. Foreign policy: public and leader opinion 2008*, 21.

Mexican writers, where two responses are a realist chronicle form that leaves the present narratively open, based on an agnosticism concerning the collective future of Mexicans, and a less cynical consumer copy whose upbeat tone is founded on the possibility that individuals have for realizing themselves personally as consumers.

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