

UC Santa Barbara

Textos Híbridos: Revista de estudios sobre la crónica latinoamericana

Title

THERE GOES MY HERO: HEROIC FIGURES, UTOPIC DISCOURSE, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CARLOS MONSIVÁIS'S _AIRES DE FAMILIA_

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2376m964>

Journal

Textos Híbridos: Revista de estudios sobre la crónica latinoamericana, 1(2)

Author

Potter, Sara

Publication Date

2011

Copyright Information

Copyright 2011 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

THERE GOES MY HERO: HEROIC FIGURES, UTOPIC DISCOURSE, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CARLOS MONSIVÁIS'S *AIRES DE FAMILIA*

Sara Potter

Washington University in St. Louis

IN HIS 2000 essay *Aires de familia*, Carlos Monsiváis traces two narrative arcs that extend across the seven chapters or shorter essays within: the first is the evolution of *utopismo* or the concept of utopia in the Latin American context. The second arc, which is contained within the first, shows the evolution and impact of the heroic figure in Latin America from roughly the last half of the 19th century until 2000. To paraphrase Voltaire, Monsiváis seems to suggest at first that if heroes did not exist, it would be necessary to invent them, asking: “¿Son concebibles las sociedades sin personajes emblemáticos?” (79) The question seems rhetorical; the others that he poses after it seem less so, which in turn casts doubt upon the first.

Can one imagine a society without emblematic characters? It is also noteworthy that Monsiváis says *characters*, not people, which in itself implies that such a figure is constructed, not born or (entirely) self-made. Even if we do assume that heroes are a necessary element in the construction of society, Monsiváis still asks us to consider: Who invents the heroes? Who decides what is heroic and exemplary behavior? Once established, are these figures inspiring, or are they so impossibly perfect as to be discouraging? (79) Finally, if Latin America is now in a post-heroic age, as Monsiváis suggests it is and has been ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall (109-11), what does it mean to live in a world without heroes? If these figures were once vital to the construction of society, what does their absence mean now to that society? Has society evolved and made them obsolete, or does this mean that the post-heroic society is in a state of deconstruction and decadence?

I would assert that these heroic figures are not so much building blocks of society as of a particular utopia or utopic discourse, which in turn shapes a History intended to shape a nation and corresponding national culture, or at least an imagined nation/culture.¹ One could argue that *Aires de familia* addresses, consciously or not, two questions posed in Roberto Fernández Retamar's essay *Calibán* in 1971. When a European reporter asks him if a Latin American culture exists, Fernández Retamar takes the question to mean, “Do *you* [Latin Americans] exist?” (19, my emphasis). Nearly thirty years later, Monsiváis also tackles the question of Latin American

¹ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, 1991.

culture(s) and existence, but from a globalized, post-neoliberal and postmodern stance. From this viewpoint, the lack of heroes and utopias could arguably be considered a liberating absence in the process of defining existence, culture and, by extension, identity. I suggest that he resists the idea of a single Latin American or Iberian American culture or identity by showing that great diversity remains among Latin Americans despite the homogenizing influence of the mass media. The question, then, is no longer *if* Latin Americans or a Latin American culture exist; rather, Monsiváis seems more interested in the formative relationships between subject(s) and culture(s) in the Latin American and global context: in other words, *how* their existence is constructed. Does a culture form the subject, does the subject form it, or is the process mutual, running in a kind of feedback loop? How does cultural hybridization manifest itself? What are the political, economical and social repercussions in each case?

Monsiváis approaches these questions in his own writing by the use of textual montage and even recycling some of his own material in *Aires de familia*, techniques that allow him to rupture any idea of unity in the text itself (Egan, “Neoliberalismo” 219-20; Muñoz 192). Mabel Moraña describes Monsiváis’s writing as “[g]ozosamente *light*, aunque comprometida con una aguda e indiscriminada ironía que apunta a lo profundo” (22). This holds true for *Aires de familia* as well; it reads easily but is surprisingly difficult to summarize due to its multifaceted textual organization. Adolfo Castañón offers a fairly concise synopsis:

En *Aires de familia* Carlos Monsiváis reúne en un haz ensayístico el cuerpo disperso de su legión de intereses—la literatura, la historia, el cine, la radio, la TV, la política, la cultura popular, la crítica de las costumbres, la historia del gusto y de la moda: los códigos y subcódigos que informan el sistema de la moda latinoamericana—a través de una serie de miradas y vistazos panorámicos a las redes imaginarias que unen a América Latina y que dibujan las fronteras simbólicas de su intrahistoria reciente. (36)

The essay, which is really more of a hybrid between chronicle and essay due to its combination of the historical, the personal, and the analytical, weaves a complicated textual web in which one train of thought is connected to and can agitate (and be agitated by) all the others. In looking at the relationships between subject, identity and culture, I will begin by considering two questions that Monsiváis poses that are at the heart of *Aires de familia*: “¿cómo se vinculan o se desvinculan las culturas nacionales y la cultura iberoamericana? ¿Dónde radica “lo latinoamericano”?” (114) The question itself is problematic; the countries in question all share a post-colonial link with

Spain,² but all have long since gained independence and developed at different rates due to topography, geographic location, and a number of other factors. Still, Monsiváis notes that “si el avance de los países es desigual, las semejanzas son extraordinarias” in terms of problems faced, solutions invented, and artistic and literary developments (115). I would like to discuss these differences and similarities in three interconnecting areas: the cult of the hero, the concept of utopia, and the construction (or perhaps articulation would be more accurate) of cultural identity. After looking at how and if the heroic figure, the utopic concept, and cultural identity shape each other (or not), I will lastly address the following question: in a post-heroic world where the utopias are all over (*ya no hay tal lugar*, as Alfonso Reyes might say), what elements are fundamental in shaping Latin American cultural identity?

According to Monsiváis, these heroes existed in a specific History: that of the last two hundred years of independence in Latin America, in which this History and its heroes lived symbiotically, creating and constructing each other over time to form a “dynamic duo” (79). The interrelationship is evident, but questions remain as to how these heroes were created and established, as to who decided which traits were admirable and which acts exemplary, and as to how much agreement exists between heroes created by society at large and those created by the State. In his analysis of *Aires de familia*, Boris Muñoz suggests that “el espíritu de las naciones latinoamericanas se afianza en el culto a los héroes. . . . El repaso del pasado épico y su hagiografía es entonces uno de los ejes ordenadores de las actitudes cívicas” (3). The fates of these *héroes semidivinos* (among them Simón Bolívar, José de San Martín, José Martí, and Che Guevara,) serve to cultivate a paradoxical aura of strength and frailty for those who admire them: “Somos potentes: tenemos héroes; somos frágiles: casi todos nuestros héroes son mártires” (Monsiváis 83). The types of heroes change with the needs of the times: for example, the Maestro de la Juventud was created to respond to the process of civilization in which most of Latin America was enmeshed after the liberal reformation; the revolutionaries to legitimate the violence of the Mexican Revolution; Eva Perón to surround Juan Perón with an auratic “círculo mágico” that veiled the corruption of the regime, etc. (91-108). Furthermore, each hero also shapes and influences the progression and cultural perception of the very events that made his or her position as a cultural hero possible in the first place, creating a complicated series of feedback loops between the events themselves, the hero-figure, the public veneration which establishes and affirms the hero as such, and the ways in which the hero shapes or influences his or her *pueblo*.

Over time, the heroes change, evolve, or decay. While poets, teachers, and revolutionaries were the heroes of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th,

² Monsiváis explicitly limits himself to addressing the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin or Iberian America, explaining that, “por razones de ‘incompatibilidad de imperios’ es mínimo o nulo por un período prolongado el registro de los brasileños” (*Aires* 120).

these figures were later displaced by film actors and athletes, mostly soccer players and boxers. Monsiváis notes that boxing appealed to the lower classes and finds it noteworthy that no bourgeois fighter has ever been a world champion. The sport is violent and difficult, but, as he explains, “*Hacerla en el boxeo es ahorrarse muchos rounds en la vida*” (99, original emphasis). Soccer has a similar appeal in that it is an everyman’s game that could lead to great riches, but if not, “a diferencia de la política, todos los que no han sido astros del fútbol carecen por completo de resentimiento” (99). Both film and sports have the potential to distract the public from politics and religion; as Monsiváis asks, “¿Quién quiere ser santa o heroína pudiendo añadirle a sus facciones el impulso de Katharine Hepburn o Barbara Stanwyck?” (55) Men and women were inspired by the fashions exhibited in films as well: hair, clothes, makeup, posture, and behavior. Initially, the heroes were to inspire and reassure the masses, as in the case of revolutionaries and poets; in contrast, sports and film were more democratizing mediums and felt more accessible to the general public.

The question remains, however: do these heroes form us or do we form them? Or is it a mutual process of formation? In *Conciencia y posibilidad del mexicano*, Leopoldo Zea is very much against the idea of an imagined, constructed subject:

El hombre no es algo hecho, sino algo que va haciéndose. ... Se habla del hombre, pero del hombre en situación, del hombre en una circunstancia determinada. Es esta situación o circunstancia la que va dando al hombre su perfil concreto, su auténtica realidad: lo que hace que un hombre sea hombre y no una entidad abstracta. (19)

Zea applies the same philosophy to the Mexican Revolution; while the Revolution did not lack for men, ideas, or ideals, those who fought were men from all classes and all socioeconomic positions and all did so in response to concrete, specific problems rather than a particular philosophy, theory, or doctrine (as was the case in the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution) (28-30). In contrast, in the hero-construction described by Monsiváis, Villa came to symbolize armed social justice and Zapata was seen as a selfless figure who worked for the benefit of others. These hero-constructions, though factually inaccurate, can be very powerful in the national imaginary; Zapata, for example, still has “un sitio primordial en las clases populares y el sector indígena, y por eso surge en Chiapas el Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional” (Monsiváis 93). It no longer matters who Zapata really was or what he did; rather, his image and aura have been appropriated, and quite effectively, by the Zapatistas in Chiapas to further their own revolutionary ends.

Heroes, then, are made, not born; in contrast, identity is always already formed and is in constant evolution. While writing about *Aires de familia*, Boris Muñoz attempts to address the question of the existence of a Latin American identity in his analysis of Monsiváis’s essay (191). He concludes, rather hopelessly:

. . . si las mutaciones que oscilan entre lo local y lo global, con sus respectivas renunciaciones y adquisiciones de uno y otro lado, son la profecía del futuro vale la pena plantearse otra vez la pregunta: ¿tiene algún sentido seguir hablando de identidad latinoamericana? (Muñoz 197)

His question is not unlike the others posed by Monsiváis in the sense that it initially seems rhetorical but, if considered more carefully, requires careful thought and analysis to even begin to answer. In response to Muñoz's question, I would pose that the challenge is not to construct this identity, since it is already formed. Rather, the difficulty lies in how to articulate an identity that is in such a constant state of flux. Jesús Martín Barbero confirms that the idea of identity has gotten more complicated; in a conference talk given in Montreal in 2002, he indicates that the term "identity" has acquired more layers in the 21st century:

Hasta hace muy poco decir identidad era hablar de raíces, de raigambre, territorio, y de tiempo largo, de memoria simbólicamente densa. De eso y solamente de eso estaba hecha la identidad. Pero decir identidad hoy implica también—si no queremos condenarla al limbo de una tradición desconectada de las mutaciones perceptivas y expresivas del presente—hablar de redes, de flujos, de migraciones y movibilidades, de instantaneidad y desanclaje. (*La globalización en clave cultural*, 1st section, 5th paragraph)

Martín Barbero uses the term *moving roots* from English anthropologists as a metaphor of this new layer of identity, and the image fits quite well with Monsiváis's descriptions of Mexican and Latin American realities in a globalized, postmodern, postneoliberal, and quite possibly posthuman environment.³ I will focus on these moving roots in greater detail when talking about the migrations that Monsiváis records in the fifth chapter or essay in *Aires*: "Desperté y ya era otro" (155).

Assuming that hero-figures can and do form us as we form them, it is also worth asking if the mediums in which they work (radio, film, television, etc.) function in a similar fashion. In Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, originally published in 1964, McLuhan raises some points about technology and culture that are still very valid in reference to *Aires de familia*. His famous affirmation, "the medium is the message," insists that the medium shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action (9). He finds technology to have a largely decentralizing or fragmentary effect on its human users, as does Monsiváis; this decentralization is not an inevitable consequence of exposure to technology, however (36). McLuhan sees

³ See Ch. 2 of Beatriz Sarlo's *Escenas de la vida posmoderna* re. zapping.

the contacts between human and machine as an extension of self; these extensions have what he describes as a numbing, self-centering Narcissus effect. “All extensions of ourselves, in sickness or in health, are attempts to maintain equilibrium. Any extension of ourselves [is regarded as] “autoamputation” (42). To cope with the amputation, McLuhan suggests, the body goes numb, since “[s]elf-amputation forbids self-recognition” (43). In other words, a person watching television (particularly with a remote control in hand), holding a gun, flying an airplane, listening to the radio, etc., is engaging in just such a process of extension and self-amputation. McLuhan proposes that, since we are so immersed in the technology we create, we are absorbed (though we remain “fertile” and are hence able to produce more and different machines) into a sort of love-worship affair with the machine world (46). It is not much of a stretch to suggest that this organic immersion in technology has only gotten deeper in the forty-odd years since McLuhan first wrote *Understanding Media* thanks to the development and/or invention of email, the internet, PDAs, cellular phones, social networks, etc.⁴

Monsiváis recognizes a similar process of absorption and production between man and technology in “Las ínclitas razas ubérrimas,” although his terminology is significantly less sinister than McLuhan’s. For example, in Latin American filmmaking in the first half of the 20th century, normal human beings are elevated from mediocrity to being gods of the silver screen; they are no longer heroes, but idols, which is, to paraphrase Gershwin, nicer work if you can get it: “Ser héroe es imposible y demasiado riesgoso; ser estrella de Hollywood es imposible y muy recompensante” (55). Here an extra mediatic layer is added to the interaction between the viewer and the film produced in Latin America: films from Hollywood may not always directly influence Latin American films, but Latin American filmmakers are constantly aware of Hollywood’s presence and example. Latin American films are produced by writers, directors, actors, etc., to meet the desires and requirements of public interest and censorship laws; the movies also produce their public, resulting in what Monsiváis calls the symbiosis of screen and reality (62). This symbiosis between film and reality has been going on for so long that, as he indicates, nobody remembers life before or without its influence. “¿Y cómo saber si antes del cine la gente hablaba o se movía distinto?” (58) Cinematic contact, or screen-reality symbiosis, has changed the very way people speak and move; now that film is such a familiar medium, it is difficult, if not impossible, to prove that they spoke or moved any other way.

Monsiváis’s tone becomes less playful and more concerned as he closes “Las ínclitas razas ubérrimas.” In the 1970s, he recalls, the “industry of spectacle” begins to make fewer films and more telenovelas, which he feels do not have the same positive cultural formative strength as movies. Beatriz Sarlo would agree; two decades later, in

⁴ Curiously, some late-20th and 21st century “amputees” are so immersed that they have gone beyond the point of numbness and into pain, as evidenced by upswings in carpal tunnel syndrome and Blackberry thumb.

Escenas de la vida posmoderna (1994), she explains the different demands made on the viewer by film and by television. “La televisión nos quiere a su lado (a diferencia del cine, que necesita de la oscuridad, la distancia, el silencio, la concentración atenta, la televisión no necesita ninguna de estas situaciones ni cualidades” (98). The implication is that the television viewer will likely experience just the opposite: bright light, close quarters, noise, and distraction. It would seem that the relationship between viewer and television is still close, but perhaps less beneficial to the viewer as s/he becomes part of the increasingly distracted masses.⁵ Indeed, Jesús Martín Barbero’s 2010 analysis of the consumer’s participation in the city (and therefore citizenship) through television and its evolutions draws directly from Monsiváis’s work on film from the mid-70s.⁶ Whereas going to the movie theater was still a communal activity in that it required one to leave the house and sit with other moviegoers, watching TV in the home was and still is a relatively solitary undertaking. Furthermore, from the 1980s on, citizens have had an ever-growing number of viewing choices thanks to the rise of cable television, satellite dishes, and the opportunity to consume more movies at home by VCR—made TV the “main mediator” in the fragmentation of the citizenry via the market (Martín Barbero, “Tecnidades” 6). At the same time, (that is, in the mid-70s through the mid-80s in Latin America), military dictatorships, economic crises, and lack of government support have caused the literary industry to suffer; writers must publish via Spanish editorials if they wished to be published outside of their own countries and/or dodge dictatorial censorship (*Aires* 153-54). One could conclude, then, that as the masses become more distracted (via television, which Sarlo presents as the artistic and literary equivalent of fast food) and frightened, they also become more isolated. While the process of formation is still mutual between television and viewer, Monsiváis and Sarlo seem to agree that it is not always symbiotic.

Having examined some possibilities of mutual processes of production and formation between heroes and admirers, movies and moviegoers, and television and the masses, it is fairly safe to say that these are all ways of forming a cultural identity in the current globalized environment. The last hypothesis to test, then, is that of utopic discourse and its potential role in shaping a History, a nation and its culture. The idea of utopia in the Latin American context is perhaps the most difficult one to pin down. Beatriz Pastor recognizes this in her 1993 essay on utopia and conquest; she begins by confirming, albeit hesitantly, Angel Rama’s statement that “no es posible ser latinoamericano sin poseer una viva conciencia utópica” (105). One page later, while reviewing various chroniclers’ fantastic accounts of the “New World,” she explains

⁵ Perhaps the most familiar players in this debate are Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno.

⁶ Monsiváis, “El cine nacional,” *Historia General de México*, Vol. 4., 1976; Martín Barbero, “Television: a question of space between proximities,” *Quaderns del Cac*, 2010, 6.

why such an affirmation is paradoxical to her: “La América colonial no es una utopía: es una monstruosidad. Y sin embargo la proyección utópica de los sueños y visiones de aquellos mismos que la crearon es innegable. ¿Cuál es la relación entre ambas?” (106) The key, it seems, lies in the definition of utopia or the utopic that one chooses. Pastor begins by discarding Thomas More’s definition of utopia, which was centered (perhaps satirically) on communism, and leaning instead toward the more discursively rooted explanation of French philosopher and semiotician Louis Marin:

La utopía es un discurso, pero no un discurso del concepto. Es un discurso de figuras: un modo particular de discurso figurativo. . . . Es una de las regiones del discurso centrado en lo imaginario. . . . Apunta a una posible reconciliación futura señalando una contradicción presente entre el concepto y la historia. (Marin 13-14)

Upon unpacking Monsiváis’s conception of and approach to utopia in *Aires de familia*, it seems that his concept shares various key points with Marin’s. In “*América, América mía*,” he recounts the dream of a united Latin America:

La utopía es el término de ese momento [de los años 20 y 30 del siglo XX].⁷ Y la utopía dispone, para medir su amplitud, de dos contrastes: la situación caótica en los países versus el orden que surge en los Estados Unidos, y el ámbito de los valores del espíritu versus el culto a lo material. (128)

This articulation of utopia was a response to the “terrible accusation” of racial inferiority from Darwinian positivists (128). The idea was to reclaim the name of “Nuestra América” (from José Martí’s essay) from the United States through figurative discourse. The resulting explosions of nationalism yielded some important and thoughtful reactions (i.e. Mariátegui’s inquiries regarding the existence of a characteristically Hispanic American form of thought) and, more problematically for Monsiváis, a growing literary divide between “cultura para el pueblo” and “elitismo” (131-33). Monsiváis seems disturbed at the end of the chapter as he asks:

¿Qué se sabe hoy de lo que ocurre culturalmente en América Latina en atmósferas dominadas por la economía y la política? ¿Son compaginables

⁷ See José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica*, 1925; Pedro Henríquez Ureña, *La utopía de América*, 1925.

la globalización y el nuevo aislacionismo? ¿Qué une y qué divide a países hermandados por las deficiencias de la economía y las gravísimas insuficientes de la política? (154)

Monsiváis has no answers, does not even have the heart to finish his essay with a period. As he often does, he trails off with a final thought and a quotation in italics, this one slightly altered from Quevedo: “La cultura iberoamericana existe, pero los modos tradicionales de percibirla han entrado en crisis. *Miré los muros de las patrias mías...*” (154) Quevedo’s poem only mentions one *patria*; Monsiváis’s use of the plural is a small but significant way of signaling that, as a Latin American, he has not one homeland but many, and he is concerned for all of them.

As in previous sections of *Aires de familia*, Monsiváis’s concept of utopia in the epilogue also ‘indicates a present contradiction between concept and history’ (Pastor 109). He differs from Marin, however, regarding the possibility of a reconciliation of this contradiction; Monsiváis seems less optimistic that such resolution is possible. It could be inferred, then, that both contradiction and reconciliation are required or the entire utopic enterprise is pointless. “La utopía por así decirlo permisible mide su eficacia de acuerdo con los cambios sociales” (190), insinuating that this utopia is not in effect, that there have been no changes. He is referring to sexual practices and mores between 1880-1920 in the above citation, but seems to have little faith in this sort of figurative discourse in general, regardless of the place and era in which it occurs. In the epilogue, Monsiváis notes the dissolution of the utopic spirit, which he implies is brought on largely by capitalism; again, the awareness of an existing contradiction without any promise of remediation makes Marin’s entire idea of utopia meaningless. “¿Qué sentido tiene, en el caso de las clases marginadas económicamente, hablar del “fin de las utopías”?” (250) This imaginative discourse has no effect on the millions who must focus on daily survival and who do not have time to listen to or engage in revolutionary discourse. Monsiváis’s angrily rhetorical question begs another question: if heroic figures and utopic discourses are not a universal option for shaping cultural identity, how else may this identity be formed? Based on my readings of García Canclini, Martín Barbero, Sarlo, and Monsiváis himself, I would pose that consumption, particularly in the postmodern/globalist age, has come to be a vital part of identity.

In *Escenas de la vida posmoderna*, Sarlo notes wearily that everything, even body parts, can be purchased. Consequently, “las identidades, se dice, han estallado. En su lugar no está el vacío sino el mercado” (27). The shopper becomes what Sarlo calls a reverse collector (*un coleccionista al revés*), for whom the goal is not the object, but the *identity* that such possession will grant to him or her, however briefly (and it usually is very brief). Thus, avers Sarlo, “los objetos *nos* significan” (29, original emphasis). Unfortunately, Sarlo paints herself into a bit of a corner by the end of *Escenas*. She constructs a wide variety of intelligent questions throughout the book as to how to

address the intersection of culture, art, and mass media; in the end, she can offer no other solution than to urge everyone to employ critical thought and make decisions for the greater good (193).

Seven years later after *Escenas de la vida posmoderna* is first published, García Canclini re-examines the idea of consumption. In everyday life, he notes, consumption is usually associated with useless expenditures and irrational compulsions. He is also well aware of the negative associations that consumption has acquired and notes a particular socioeconomic class bias that tends to accompany those associations:

Todavía hay quienes justifican la pobreza porque la gente compra televisores, videocaseteras y coches mientras les falta casa propia. ¿Cómo se explica que familias a las que no les alcanza para comer y vestirse a lo largo del año, cuando llega Navidad derrochen el aguinaldo en fiestas y regalos? ¿No se dan cuenta los adictos a los medios de que los noticieros mienten y las telenovelas distorsionan la vida real? (41)

The situation, García Canclini suggests, is not as simple as that of a large corporation hoodwinking the poor thoughtless masses into buying more than they need or can afford. He begins by establishing the definition of consumption from which he will work: “el consumo es el conjunto de procesos socioculturales en que se realizan la apropiación y los usos de los productos” (42-43, originally in italics). These processes have ritualistic and affective trappings placed on objects and their purchase. Recalling Marx, he suggests that the purchases of these objects in a ritualistic context “son los recursos para pensar el propio cuerpo... Consumir es hacer más inteligible un mundo donde lo sólido se evapora” (47-48). Consumption does not, then, stem from simple greed or a desire to keep up with the neighbors. It is a way of making sense of the world and also of exercising citizenship, as politics become more sensationalistic in their self-presentation and in their campaign advertisements, and as governments are increasingly eclipsed in power by huge transnational corporations that produce the objects to be consumed. This shift in ways of participating as a citizen is one of the seven key migrations that Monsiváis touches on in *Aires de familia*, in “Desperté y ya era otro.”

Perhaps the most important chapter in *Aires de familia* due to its historical scope and shrewd cultural analysis, “Desperté y ya era otro” echoes the first lines from Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. In this chapter, Monsiváis examines seven migrations in all, beginning with cultural migrations and ending with spiritual migrations. He explains that “los migrantes culturales son vanguardias a su manera” (156), implying that they are either ahead of the cultural current or at the forefront of some kind of battle:

. . . que al adoptar modas y actitudes de ruptura abandonan lecturas, devociones, gustos, usos del tiempo libre, convicciones estéticas y religiosas, apetencias musicales, cruzadas del nacionalismo, concepciones juzgadas “inmodificables” de lo masculino y de lo femenino. (156)

Long lists are typical of Monsiváis’s writing; Muñoz notes that he often employs “la enumeración caótica” (192) to fit everything in, to make sure the entire inventory of ideas is listed. It is not clear exactly why these migrations are happening because each group has varied reasons: some choose to go, others are forced, others are moving for a better life, still others simply move to survive.

The first cultural migration that Monsiváis explains in any detail is the rupture caused by the Mexican Revolution. Two quotes stand out; the first from *Los de abajo*: “¡Qué hermosa es la revolución, aun en su mismo barbarie!” (157) Intentionally or not, the character echoes sentiments also expressed in Italian Futurist poetry about the beauty of war, violence, and revolution. The timing is right; *Los de abajo* was first published in 1915, and Italian Futurism emerged around 1909. The other quote, from Octavio Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad*, is simple and to the point: “La revolución es la relevación” (157). In both cases, violence is aestheticized, but for what purpose?

The influx of *campesinos* to the cities, mostly to Mexico City, begins at the turn of the century and picks up exponentially from 1950 on. From now on, Monsiváis reminds us, “no hay un presente compartido” (*Aires* 158). That is, I may be living in modernity in the city and you in a different age in the country, even though we are both living in the same chronological time. Progress is not linear; modernity is not universal; both depend on the circumstances. Foucault makes a similar declaration in “Of Other Spaces,” an essay based on a 1967 lecture in which he explained his concept of the heterotopia, which in its turn informed his theories on shifts in power structures and in the perception of history. As ideas of history and power shift from a straight line—history as linear progress, power as imposed from high on those below—to a more complex network of connections, Foucault’s heterotopias are ideal spaces for the kind of non-shared present that Monsiváis mentions. This distance, however, can be critically productive. In his comments on Foucault’s essay, Jesús Martín Barbero notes that these Foucaultian heterotopias are “*other-places*...which make it possible to question the place where we are, showing us where we are not” (7, original emphasis). By moving away from the push to universalize history and experience, this allows for more complicated and useful observations of structures of power and economic, cultural, and social exchanges.

This shift toward a greater awareness of self and of others (but not necessarily an Other) and the ways in which the self and others interrelate is seen even earlier in Mexican history and essays. According to Leopoldo Zea’s theory, “El mexicano es...visto...como un hombre en una determinada situación. Esta situación es la que le determina y concretiza, la que le hacer ser un hombre concreto y no una simple

abstracción. Por ello, decir algo del mexicano es también decirlo del hombre” (21-22). By extension, the Latin American may also be seen as a person in a particular concrete situation.: “En lo concreto, lo más concreto, se oculta lo universal. Nada más concreto que el hombre y, al mismo tiempo, nada más universal que él mismo” (36). That is, universality and shared time are based on place and circumstances, not the year it happens to be.

While this was a vital shift in understanding history, identity, and the unequal impact of modernity in Mexico, Zea does not mention individual Mexicans or women; he does not even consider “the woman,” and as such ignoring the “conciencia y posibilidad” of the entire female population. This is not an uncommon affliction among works on Mexican identity from the first half of the 20th century; Samuel Ramos’ *mexicano* was also implicitly mestizo or criollo and male in *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (1932), and Octavio Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) presented her only as a mysterious, ethereal Other (73). His very praise is that which excludes her from the rest of his essay and from his construction of Mexican identity, since a being so ephemeral and goddess-like is completely removed from reality, and as such can hardly be expected to participate effectively or productively (if at all) in political and intellectual discourse.

Monsiváis, however, springboards off the essays that have preceded him, and is wise enough to include women (and not, thankfully, “the woman”) in *Aires de familia*. It makes sense, in a way, that intellectual constructions of national identity have not included women, since they have been excluded from constructions of the hero as well. In “*Protagonistas del alma universal*”, Monsiváis asserts that heroism consists of “el patriotismo, el temple de espíritu y el arrojo sin límites” (81). This construction stems largely from two sources: Thomas Carlyle’s 1840 text *De los héroes y el culto a los héroes y lo heroico en la historia*, which asserts that a few superior beings lend the dazzle of their own profile (of power, genius, wisdom, etc.) to their otherwise dull and insipid countrymen. The other is John Lash’s 1995 *The Hero: Manhood and Power*, which quite explicitly states that heroes are and must be men; their hero status is often achieved by the spilling of their blood, which simultaneously humanizes and deifies them (Monsiváis 81-3). While Monsiváis is clearly using “universal” ironically in reference to the Latin American soul, since he recognizes that women and non-criollo/mestizo men are excluded, he also does not mention any women in this relationship between the hero and the formation of national and continental identity until Evita Perón. She may not fit the criteria of a hero, strictly speaking, but she was essential to Perón’s status as such: “Muerta Evita, se destruye el “círculo mágico” en torno a Perón y se acrecienta o se evidencia la corrupción del regimen” (97).

The Latin American hero is also heterosexual, which Monsiváis notes with a brief, bitter wink: “En la Selva Lacandona el subcomandante Marcos, al frente del EZLN, ya no se ostenta como el guía de los redimibles,” a position made impossible by Salvador Allende, who according to Monsiváis was Latin America’s first and only

civil hero (104-05). His assassination, and the dirty war and dictatorship that followed, made it impossible for anyone else in Latin America to occupy a similar position. Some twenty years later, then, Marcos could only display a sense of humor (the situation demanded it, Monsiváis says) and, among other innovations, the revindication of gay and lesbian rights. “El comportamiento es valeroso,” Monsiváis cracks dryly, “pero el adjetivo conveniente ya no es *heroico*” (105, original emphasis). He moves on to another subject without hinting at what the appropriate adjective might be.

Monsiváis’s essay contains three key and frequently overlapping and intersecting concepts through which to articulate identity in 20th century Latin America, with a watchful eye toward the newly begun twenty-first: the quest to articulate a personal and national identity, of which the figure of the hero and the production of utopic discourse form a major part. While this drive for the creation and articulation of identity on a national or continental scale is powerful and influential in its political, cultural, and socioeconomic manifestations, it also has significant drawbacks. In her consideration of the concept of utopia in Latin America, Beatriz Pastor concludes by warning that one’s own identity is produced by an encounter between authority and the Other. As such, she argues, “cualquier identidad contiene en sí misma el germen de su propia destrucción” (112). Though Pastor’s worried tone is unmistakable, she and Monsiváis also agree that it is precisely this danger, this instability of the process of articulating identity, that which “dinamiza todo el proceso de figuración utópica en la conquista uno de los puntos históricos de anclaje de la construcción de una identidad hispanoamericana” (112). Pastor poses this last argument in the form of a question that is also the closing sentence of her essay, deliberately leaving it open-ended and thus demanding that the reader ponder the answer to her question. Monsiváis, meanwhile, is equally open-ended but more cautiously optimistic. In his epilogue, he is aware that he is finishing the book and leaving the reader dangling between the end of one century and the beginning of another; as such, he says, he has no conclusions, as he is aware that so much is in flux as he writes. His last sentence is not his, but a quote from Lezama Lima: “El gozo del ciempiés es la encrucijada” (254). From the nature of *Aires de familia*, due to its articulation from the intersection of civic discourse, utopic discourse, politics, pop culture, and countless other discursive trajectories pulled together in one mind and one chronicle-essay, it would be equally appropriate to suggest that “el gozo de *Monsiváis*” is also found in the crossroads.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1991. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theory of Distraction." *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Trans. Edmund Jephcott, et al. Cambridge: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2006. 3.141-42. Print.
- Castañón, Adolfo. *Nada mexicano me es ajeno: Seis papeles sobre Carlos Monsiváis*. México, D.F.: U Autónoma de la Ciudad de México, 2005. Print.
- Egan, Linda. *Carlos Monsiváis: Culture and Chronicle in Contemporary Mexico*. Tucson: The U of Arizona P, 2001. Print.
- . "Neoliberalismo y desaliento en *Aires de familia* de Carlos Monsiváis." *Revista de crítica literaria latinoamericana*. 28.56 (2002): 219-35. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." Trans. Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics*. 16.1 (1986): 22-27. Print.
- Fernández Retamar, Roberto. "Calibán." *Todo Calibán*. Buenos Aires: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 2004. 19-81. Print.
- García Canclini, Néstor. *Consumidores y ciudadanos: Conflictos multiculturales de la globalización*. México. D.F.: Grijalbo, 1995. Print.
- Marin, Louis. *Utópicas: Juegos de espacios*. Trad. René Palacios More. Madrid: Siglo XXI de España Editores, 1975. Print.
- Martí, José. "Nuestra América." *La revista ilustrada de Nueva York*. 10 Jan. 1891. *Analitica.com*. No pagination. Web. 10 Dec. 2008. <http://www.analitica.com/BIBLIO/jmarti/nuestra_america.asp>.
- Martín Barbero, Jesús. "La globalización en clave cultural: Una mirada latinoamericana." Academic conference lecture. 2002 Bogues: Globalisme et Pluralisme, Colloque international. Montreal, Canada. 24 April 2002. No pagination. Web. 1 Dec. 2008. <<http://www.er.uqam.ca/nobel/gricis/actes/bogues/Barbero.pdf>>.
- . "Técnicidades, identidades, alteridades: Des-ubicaciones y opacidades de la comunicación en el nuevo siglo." *Diálogos de la comunicación*. 2002. 8-24. Print.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge: The MIT P, 1994. Print.
- Monsiváis, Carlos. *Aires de familia: Cultura y sociedad en América Latina*. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2000. Print.
- Moraña, Mabel. "El culturalismo de Carlos Monsiváis: ideología y carnavalización en tiempos globales." *El arte de la ironía: Carlos Monsiváis ante la crítica*. Ed. Mabel Moraña e Ignacio Sánchez Prado. México, D. F.: Ediciones Era, 2007. 21-59. Print.

- Muñoz, Boris. "Historia de la sensibilidad latinoamericana en siete capítulos y medio". *Nueva Sociedad*. 170 (2000): 191-97. Print.
- Quevedo, Francisco de. "Miré los muros." *Antología de la poesía española*. 5 Sept. 2000. Web. 16 Dec. 2008.
<<http://users.ipfw.edu/jehle/poesia/mirelosm.htm>>.
- Pastor, Beatriz. "Utopía y conquista: Dinámica utópica e identidad colonial". *Revista de la crítica literaria latinoamericana*. 19.38 (1993): 105-13. Print.
- Salazar, Jezreel. *La ciudad como texto: La crónica urbana de Carlos Monsiváis*. Monterrey, México: U Autónoma de Nuevo León, 2006. Print.
- Sarlo, Beatriz. *Escenas de la vida posmoderna: Intelectuales, arte y videocultura en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Compañía Editora Espasa Calpe/Ariel, 1994. Print.
- Zea, Leopoldo. *Conciencia y posibilidad del mexicano*. México, D. F.: Porrúa y Obregón, 1952. Print.