

Consumer Society and National Identity in the work of
Salvador Novo and Guadalupe Loeza
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During the twentieth century, the North American economic presence (as well as the products and values that accompany it) has created interesting tensions around the concept of national identity in Mexico. On the one hand, many have seen the growing presence of North American products and the consumer life style that these products impose as a threat, not only to economic sovereignty but also to “authentic” national traditions and identity. On the other hand, in recent years, the government has promoted North-American style trade and technological modernity as the panacea, the key to the Promised Land of the “First World” and the ultimate proof of national greatness.

This study compares and contrasts several texts by Salvador Novo (1904-1974) with the novel *Compro luego existo* by Guadalupe Loeza (contemporary) in order to examine the representation of the relationship between North American consumer culture and the Mexican middle and upper-classes.

In his time, Novo belonged as Loeza does today, to the Mexican upper class. As writers, both are known not only for their fiction (and in Novo’s poetry) but also for their chronicles about life in Mexico City in which they cast an ironic gaze over the customs and values of the Mexican upper classes. These often cutting observations “from the inside” are not motivated exclusively by a desire to condemn the upper classes but rather, aim also to stimulate self-reflection in this portion of society. In this paper, it is not my intention to confirm or contradict this criticism, but rather to examine its construction.

The similarities between the work of these authors become even more interesting when we consider that they write in different periods. Novo wrote the texts considered here during the 1920s, which mark the beginning of the flood of “modern” North-American products into the Mexican market. Guadalupe Loeza writes during the 1980s and 1990s when the North American Free Trade agreement was being debated and signed. (NAFTA was signed in 1992 and went fully into effect January 1, 1994. *Compro luego existo* was published in 1992). During these years there was another overwhelming flood of North American products and companies into the Mexican market.

Both authors present important manifestations of the consumer habits of the Mexican middle and upper classes in relation to North American products and economic practices. They ironically observe how these products and practices are received, and adapted or rejected. Through these observations they explore the relationship between consumer activities and national identity, as well as the responsibility felt by the middle and upper classes to use their purchasing power to preserve Mexican history while at the same time demonstrating Mexico’s modernity and equality with other “First World” countries.

Before beginning the reading of the texts, it is important to consider the historical frame of this study. It is clear that the consumer habits that I am going to discuss here cannot be defined simply as consumer issues but rather that they are tied to the technological revolution and its values as well as a broader problem confronting modern culture: “the desire to be cosmopolitan without having to completely renounce a distinctive cultural identity.” (Rosaldo, 201) These tensions (which, of course, do not belong exclusively to Mexico or to Latin America) are an integral part of the debate about modernization and Latin American identity in general and particularly during the twentieth century. Already in 1900, in his essay “Ariel,” Rodó questions “la visión de una América *deslatinizada* por propia voluntad” (35) Speaking of what he calls “nordomania” he says:

Comprendo bien que se adquieran inspiraciones, en el ejemplo de los fuertes... Pero no veo la gloria... en el propósito de desnaturalizar el carácter de los pueblos... para imponerles la identificación con un modelo extraño al que ellos sacrifiquen la originalidad irremplazable de su espíritu... (35-36)

This defense of cultural identity as original and particular becomes even stronger in face of the territorial and military aggression of the government of Theodore Roosevelt. (summarized and symbolized by the Roosevelt Corollary and the Monroe Doctrine.) It is useful here to remember Ruben Darío’s poem “A Roosevelt” (1905) in which he celebrates Latin American history, high-culture, language and religion as the forces which will oppose North American greed and military force. History, high-culture, language and religion are central elements in the construction of Latin American and Mexican identity at the beginning of the twentieth century.

By the 1920s, when Novo begins to write, the vision of the United States as the political, military, economic and cultural enemy predominates among Latin American intellectuals. The Iberoamerican movement, which promoted regional unity through political agreements, cultural exchanges and periodic meetings, is in full swing. The Mexican intellectual and politician José Vasconcelos (1881-1959) strongly supported the movement and expressed one of the central motives behind the projects which promoted Iberoamerican unity: “Es menester que procedamos si hemos de lograr que la cultura Ibérica acabe de dar todos sus frutos, si hemos de impedir que en América triunfe sin opción la cultura sajona” (19).

In his article, “Narrar la multiculturalidad”, Néstor García Canclini proposes two visions of national identity which help in understanding the tension between the tenets of national identity described above and the view of consumer society in the work of Novo and Loeza: the “fundamentalist” vision and the “constructivist” vision. According to García Canclini, the “fundamentalist” vision:

Absolutiza el encuadre territorial originario de las etnias y naciones y afirma dogmáticamente los rasgos biológicos y telúricos asociados a ese origen como si fueran ajenas a las peripecias históricas y los cambios contemporáneos. (10)

The “constructivist” vision, on the other hand:

Consibe las identidades como históricamente constituídas, imaginadas y reinventadas en procesos constantes de hibridación y transnacionalización que disminuyen sus antiguos arraigos territoriales. (10)

After the Mexican Revolution, one of the central projects of the official Mexican cultural institutions has been the construction and the defense of Mexican identity with the tactics of the “fundamentalist” vision, as described above. Novo questions this mythic identity in the moment of its formation and explores the contradictions of promoting and affirming a national identity as “essential” when the tools used to construct it are in plain sight. Loeza investigates its deformation at the end of the century and raises questions about the implications of what she sees as the loss of this identity. In the work of both, the North American presence is the source of the trans-nationalization which challenges this national identity and ultimately, both authors reveal how this cultural clash points toward a new, distinct, cosmopolitan identity.

During the 1920s, Novo was a young dandy who was fascinated by the modern changes in the physiognomy of the country in general and of Mexico City in particular. In spite of the resistance among intellectuals noted above, North American, as well as other international, influence were central to these changes as we can see in Novo’s 1923 chronicle about the city “El Joven”. In this piece, Novo, thinly disguised by the fiction of a convalescent youth, sets out to rediscover Mexico City after an absence caused by a prolonged illness. He begins his journey in the downtown shopping district where he goes along reading the many signs “Man Spricht Deutsch, ‘Florsheim,’ Empuje usted. Menú: sopa moscovita...” (537). In the advertisements the youth sees a burgeoning modern metropolis, an increase in specialization, a somewhat intimidating foreign presence. “¿Quien no sepa pronunciar osará comerse un *Marshmallow puff*?” (537). This chronicle, like other chronicles and essays that Novo rights during the period, is defined by nostalgia for a more simple past, coupled with an ironic and critical fascination for the manifestations of capitalistic industrialization, or as Novo calls it “la fuerza que crea dividiendo en nuestra moderna sociedad” (539).

At the crossroads of two eras, Novo’s gaze alternates from the old to the new, capturing the chaotic richness of the mixture of traditional culture with North American mass-marketing techniques and products. In spite of the generally hostile view predominant among intellectuals at the time, Novo finds both good and bad in the relationship with the North. Though in his essays he frequently criticizes the invasion of Mexico by North American products and consumer habits, which put Mexican customs at risk, he is also concerned by what he sees to be the paralysis or stagnation of Mexican high culture. From this point of view he admires the North American ability to relate to and invent the present:

El pueblo “de allende del Bravo” descubre el pasado ocasionalmente. Nosotros descubrimos el presente, tan exterior a nuestra vida, tan casualment como ellos la Historia. Por eso nuestra cultura se detiene en 1900 y es, sobre todo, francesa. (“El joven,” (550))

Behind this mixed vision of the North is the realization that, for better or worse, the bonds of the relationship with the United States are unbreakable: through the same doorway that allows the entrance of the consumer culture which drains existence of all traditional meaning come the interpretive skills which permit the assimilation of the above changes. Thus Novo states that in spite of his condemnation of the effects of North American consumer items:

Yo no siento hacia los Estados Unidos ninguna mala voluntad. Si no fuese por ellos, habríamos tardado bastantes años en saber que en Italia existe un Luigi Pirandello, que en Checoslovaquia los hermanos Capek, durante el año pasado surtieron a los teatros de Nueva York, que se habían cansado ya de Rusia, con dos extrañas y trascendentes obras de teatro, *Los robots* y *La vida de los insectos*;...que Jean Coteau...ha representado con fonógrafos *Les mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, que Eugenio O'Neill hace teatro nacional.... (“Mis razones,” 44)

Significantly, Novo goes beyond the mere affirmation of the United States as a source of high culture and strives to find value and meaning for Mexican culture in North American technology and mass production:

¿Que los Estado Unidos no han hecho sino traducir? No les quitemos el mérito real de haber construido los teléfonos, de popularizar el radio, de conservar los discos de Caruso, con máquinas... Día llegará en que las máquinas, de útiles, pasen a ser bellas, como columnas griegas. (44) (“Mis razones,” 44)

This willingness to examine North American innovations without prejudice and to even find beauty in them, allows Novo to find strategies for modern existence which he offers to Mexican culture.

The mention of translation above is a good example of this. In the biographical note which proceeds his own translations of poems by Vachel Lindsay which appeared for the first time in 1925, Novo makes this observation about the value of translation for literature in the English language:

Todos saben que el afán filibustero y colonizador –en el buen sentido de la palabra—ha sido provechoso ejercicio en la literatura de lengua inglesa, desde Fitzgerald y tal vez desde la traducción de la Biblia del rey Jaime. Nadie ignora la decisiva y formidable influencia de talentos como el de Allen Upward, Ezra Pound, que pusieron Grecia al día en lengua inglesa. De universitarios como Arthur Waley, Amy Lowell y Witter Bynner que, desde 1917, buscaron en los tesoros poéticos de China la visión directa y sintética, el rasgo esencial que caracteriza hoy a los poetas americanos.... (“El buen té,” 62-63)

Rather than a sign of weakness, or of a lack of creative talent, Novo shows translation to be an essential tool in creation, a pathway toward growth, a defense against stagnation. In his essay, “El Pensador Mexicano” (1924), which is a re-evaluation of the life and work of Fernández de Lizardi, Novo points to the need for this process of creative translation in Mexican literature:

...Todavía necesitamos de algunos pensadores mexicanos que olviden las cuestiones estéticas y amén a su país en las minucias espirituales que lo constituyen por idiosincrasia y que...apliquen la actualidad social y literaria extranjera a este su país.... (“El pensador,” 60)

Novo's willingness to find the beauty, the art in mechanization along with his willingness to explore the realm of translation provide an important new Latin American interpretation of North America at the time. In the texts mentioned above and in others, Novo proposes a new, more positive relationship with the North. In the play, *Divorcio* (1925) he is more concerned with deciphering the relationship that **already** exists with the United States. It is important to notice how he transposes the model of translation from the literary realm of high culture to the living room of popular culture, for it is in this step

that he shows Mexican culture translating lessons learned from North American culture and using them to maintain a separate and unique identity.

Briefly, the story line of the play is as follows: Benito, the adored, only son of a middle-class accountant, returns to Mexico from his studies in the United States. Much to the dismay of his parents, he returns married to Mrs. Gutenberg, an American divorcee who displays all the stereotypical frivolity of the American tourist: She has married the hero simply because she wanted to make a trip to Mexico, and she proceeds to ignore the true Mexico as she loses herself in the shops to buy “typical” arts and crafts. His parents, who have striven to prepare the perfect setting for their son, complete with an acceptable “novia”, Elena (who lives with them), refuse to accept the situation and arrange a divorce. Conveniently, the father’s secretary Raymond (who is also a North American and who has become involved with Elena) turns out to be Mrs. Gutenberg’s ex-husband, and she is happy to be reunited with him. Elena and Benito, recuperated from their temporary insanity, settle back together comfortably, though somewhat bewildered by their inexplicable attraction to the movie-star-like North Americans.

Though ostensibly a criticism of the shallowness of North American culture, the play actually explores the more significant paradox of middle-class Mexican attraction to that shallowness and the dependence of the illusion of stability on the practices or “tools” offered by North American culture. Novo sets the scene with much care, describing the furniture, the pictures on the walls, even the ashtrays in a typical middle-class Mexican living room of the time. Though this is a play, it was never performed, but rather appears as a text to be read, in the collection *Ensayos*. Thus the dramatic genre serves to emphasize the performatory nature of middle-class Mexican society which Novo ridicules and the elaborate description makes the reader aware of the similarities between a real, middle-class Mexican living room and a set on a theatre stage.

Novo’s view of middle-class existence as excessively performatory is shown not only in the setting but also, and more importantly, in the concerns of the characters. The older generation has sought to create stability for the younger generation by creating the appearance of a rich historical patrimony. The father says to the mother:

Yo contador, no supe prever que mi hijo diera tal pago a mis desvelos. Para él, con la esperanza de hacerle un castillo, compré las ruinas de San Angel. Para él, los santos estofados de Guatemala y los muebles coloniales. En previsión de sus estados civiles me hice cargo de Elena desde su infancia... (47).

The younger generation, it seems, has been briefly blinded by the “avasalladora fuerza del cine americano” (149). As Elena and Benito reunite, they justify their infidelities based on the resemblance of Raymond and Mrs. Gutenberg to movie stars:

Benito: (sonriente) ¿me perdonarás algún día haberte pospuesto el derecho de perniada?

Elena: ¡Pst! Yo estuve a punto de cometer tu error. Aquel Raimundo...¿verdad que se parecía a...a...?

Benito: A cualquiera estrella, querida. Todos son iguales, procedimientos Griffith. Mrs. Gutenberg se parecía extraordinariamente a Gloria Swanson. (50)

Though they have settled back safely into their world, decorated with emblems from the past which create the illusion of a stability based on tradition and thus safe from the emptiness of North American culture, the possibility of existing in this staged world is owed, paradoxically to that North American world. For while North American culture,

represented by Mrs. Gutenberg, disrupted the stability of this setting, it simultaneously permitted the restoration of that stability through the possibility of divorce.

Benito's family seeks respectability through time-honored institutions such as marriage and colonial heritage, things contradictory to the world represented by Raymond and Mrs. Gutenberg. Yet the appearance of such respectability is only created through the use of techniques borrowed from Raymond and Mrs. Gutenberg's world. In the modern world, history can be bought in an old building or antique furniture, and the sacred bonds of marriage can be broken and re-joined until the desired appearance of respectability has been achieved. Yet through these economic manipulations (the father says of the divorce: "Costará dinero" (48)) the desired stability would seem to be emptied of all meaning even as it is created. Yet, even as Novo reveals the hypocrisy of the pseudo-aristocratic stance of the Mexican middle-class, he shows them to be already skilled "creative translators" in their ability to use techniques from North American consumer culture to create a practical reality which is antithetical to that culture. From this perspective, the "pseudo-aristocratic stance," while emptied of its traditional meaning, holds a new, and as yet unspecified, modern meaning.

In this way, Novo shows that the elements of the "fundamentalist" identity are parts that make up a "constructivist" identity and that those elements have become consumer products. But in the moment that Novo writes, he is more concerned with the dangers of cultural stagnation than with the dangers of a modern identity based on the "consumption" of symbols. And thus, his goal is not to underscore the dangers of the emptiness of consumer culture but rather to undo the rigidity of the national identity by making fun of "fundamentalist" identities, which try to hide their constructed nature.

Guadalupe Loeza, on the other hand, is worried about the dangers of an identity based on consumption as is clear from the very title of her novel *Compro luego existo* which is, of course, a variation on Descartes' famous phrase. Through her upper-class Mexican characters, Loeza 1) reveals how empty and destructive the values of North American consumer culture are, 2) condemns the a-critical adoption of these values in the era of neo-liberalism and the North American Free Trade Agreement, 3) reveals how, under these circumstances, the symbols of "fundamentalist" national identity are completely transformed into consumer products and 4) paves the way for finding a new cosmopolitan and distinctive identity. Before beginning the discussion of identity in this work, I want to describe briefly the structure and content of the book.

The novel has six chapters: Miami, La cena, Un "week-end" en Tepoz, Un "week-end" en Nueva York, Un "week-end" en Valle, and Un "week-end" en el D.F... Each chapter presents a different family from a group of friends who are presented as a parody of the Mexican upper class at the beginning of the 1990s. Each family is very well off. They belong to what the text calls "nivel socioeconómico A" and have monthly incomes of between 70,000 new pesos and 100,000 new pesos. At the time, the exchange rate was 3 new pesos to the dollar and so this was an income equivalent to 23,000 dollars to 33,000 dollars a month. Some of the families are longstanding members of the upper class, others represent the "new rich", but all of the characters attribute their present overwhelming prosperity to "las nuevas oportunidades y facilidades que han venido con la era del Tratado de Libre Comercio entre EEUU, México y Canadá, o como todos lo llaman: el TLC" (91).

As well as presenting the families, each chapter presents a specific category of consumer practices along with the problems associated with these categories. The love of “gadgets”, the addiction to “shopping” (these words appear in English in the Spanish text) and the vulnerability to advertising that are part of this “illness” are some example of the categories related to traditionally defined “consumer products”. However, the novel expands the definition of “consumer product” to other aspects of life, for example, history, love, high culture and social status.

The combination of the presentation of the characters with the presentation of consumer themes forces us to consider the process of identity formation in relation to consumer habits. Once again, my reading will be centered on the contrast between the “fundamentalist” national identity and the “constructivist” transnational and modern identity.

In spite of the fact that all of the characters comment on their “mexicaness” and are happy to return after their trips abroad, it is clear that they do not find the basic signs of identity in the national setting but rather in the world of global consumption. The performative nature of these identities is even more apparent than in Novo’s play. This can be seen in the way the characters are introduced. The name of each character is followed by a list in parentheses, which gives us the essential key to his or her identity. The specific details change according to the age and sex of the character but they have in common certain information, which indicate the economic status or purchasing power of the character. For example, the male heads of households are given the most detailed classification and their names are followed by qualifiers such as: “Nivel socioeconómico (A,B, o C),” “Lugar de residencia,” “ingreso familiar mensual,” “tipo de vivienda,” “Viajes y pasatiempos.” “automóviles,” “educación,” “empleados domesticos.” The specific details for each category define the person. Within this definition of the family everyone, men, women and children, are identified by the brand of their clothes, and their perfume. In these cases, the parentheses contain the prices of the objects in old **and** new pesos, and if the object was bought abroad, the price is also given in dollars or francs. The same tactic is used with house decorations and the cars that they drive. North American and French brands are the most prestigious. How much their identity is dependent upon the things that they buy and how hungry they are for some more essential identity is dramatically underscored by the mournful observation of one of the female characters While on a shopping trip in New York, she see the duchess of Badajoz in an exclusive restaurant:

Llena de paquetes como yo, pero de tiendas mucho más ¡chafas! ¿Quién iba a decir que la hermana del rey Juan Carlos comprara en esas tiendas? Lo que pasa es que ella no necesita gastar para ser duquesa. Ella de todos modos lo es, aunque se ponga ropa de negra. (147)

In this modern system of identity construction, signs of national identity have not disappeared; but here even more than in Novo’s work, the traditional symbols of the “fundamentalist” national identity have become consumer products. For example, religion is defined by the status of being “profundamente guadalupana” because “para la burquesía mexicana era una forma *sno*b de ser católicos y muy mexicanos a la vez.” (73). The expression of this religiosity is reduced, however, to having pictures of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the house: “siempre y cuando se tratara de pinturas auténticas de estilo colonial o popular” (73).

Once again, as in Novo's work, we see history as a sign of national identity defined by the antiques that the characters buy. One of the men in the novel collects old books and antiques. When his wife objects to this hobby because they do not have enough space to store so many things, he justifies his purchases by saying that they are investments, that they are part of his children's patrimony, that they provide historical reference points and that besides, he is doing a service to the nation because: 1) he is keeping the objects in the country and 2) by loaning them to shows in national and foreign museums, he contributes to "La promoción de la cultura del país" (121) But all of these justifications are mixed together with others about the value of these objects as investments (he is happy about buying a piece of furniture for 10,000 new pesos which is really worth 30,000) and with comments about the status he gains from having these objects displayed in museums with his name beside them. Contrary to what happens in Novo's work (where the transformation of these signs of national identity into consumer products protects and permits the continuation of that national identity), here the transformation of the old signs of identity into consumer products empties them of their traditional meaning and they no longer serve to defend traditional identity from consumer identity. Nevertheless, they do continue to function in some way as signs of identity. One of the challenges the book presents is to try and understand the new function of this old identity.

As well as presenting the conversion of "traditional" signs of identity into consumer products, Loeza points to the deterioration of other elements of and projects designed to develop and defend the "fundamentalist" national identity. Some examples are the deterioration of the Spanish language, the changed appreciation of high culture and the education of the young.

All the characters speak English and French, but the Spanish that they speak is tremendously informal, and often incorrect. This can be noticed most of all in the younger characters. They use extremely vulgar expressions (for example, the girls say "Me da gueva" instead of "no tengo ganas" (158)) and they make grammatical errors (for example, "Espero que no haiga" (128)). These could be taken simply as characteristics of the language of adolescents but the text underscores these error with "(sic)" or some more extensive comment on language. Great importance is placed, however on learning a foreign language. For example, some of the children are sent to summer camp in the United States and warned by their mother to not speak Spanish: "don't talk to Mexicans." (69) Yet, when the adult characters go abroad, instead of using English or French to appreciate some cultural event or to close an important business deal, they use English to speak to the sales people in the malls and French to get a good table in exclusive New York restaurants. Their conversations are peppered with foreign words and it would seem that the creative and renewing process of translation seen in Novo's work has disappeared as the native Spanish is displaced by, and melded to English (although this process of language translation in itself can lead to interesting reflections on the evolution of culture and identity, in the novel this trend is presented in a negative light) .

The appreciation of high culture and the humanities, which was so central to José Vasconcelos' education projects for modernizing and civilizing Mexican culture, has changed radically. The characters don't go to the theatre or the opera or the museums because they are interested but, instead, as a sign of their status. As Alejandra says "Hay

que ir..si no..¿qué van a decir mis cuates?”(150). It’s also important to remember the central role of “los jovenes” as the hope for the future in the turn-of-the-century projects for Mexican and Latin American advancement. In *Compro luego existo*, the rich young do not take advantage of their educational opportunities. They spend the day sleeping in their classes and the nights in the discotheques . They attend prestigious and expensive universities. They do not choose their schools because of academic prestige but rather because “allí los profesores son barcos” (124). (this means very lenient)

In moments like those described above and in others, the tone of the novel seems to indicate Loeza’s profound disgust with the Mexican upper class and it would seem that she is more interested in condemning this class for abandoning or distorting the tenets of the “fundamentalist” identity than in deciphering the meaning of its new identity. In this aspect of the novel the myth that NAFTA will be the road to redemption for Mexico is portrayed as a main culprit in the identity crisis. The characters believe wholeheartedly in the myth. At a party they observe happily “Con el TLC todo se va a superar” and are pleased that the Spanish newspaper *El país* affirms that “México ya [es] considerado como del Primer Mundo” (91) They listen to a song by Pedro Infante (a symbol himself of the “fundamentalist” national identity) and dream of the splendors to come “un país cada vez más moderno, más rico, más cosmopolita, más industrial y más democrático.” As the song ends, they sigh contently, “ahora sí se podrá decir que ‘¡Como México no hay dos!’” (108) Yet in spite of this optimism, the characters demonstrate growing anguish and confusion throughout the novel. In spite of their money, in spite of their purchasing power, in spite of the possibilities for new markets in Mexico where they will become even richer, the characters suffer guilt attacks after their “shopping sprees” and they don’t even know what to do with all that they buy. And in spite of the affirmation that they belong now to the “First World,” on their trips to the United States they continually fight a sense of inferiority in which admiration for all they see is mixed with the need to defend personal and national honor by showing that they know how to function in this setting. (This is most predominant in the chapters “Miami” and “Un weekend en Nueva York”)

The most profound criticism of NAFTA is aimed not so much at these issues of identity crisis, but more at showing all the problems that it cannot solve. Ironically, the characters themselves point out the shortcomings of NAFTA. For example, speaking of the pollution in Mexico City they joke:

--Ahora con el TLC, si pudiéramos importar aire puro sería ma-ra-vi-llo-so./

--Lo que también podríamos hacer es exportar éste.

--Ja, Ja, very funny. (106)

These conversations about NAFTA also underline class and race problems which exist in Mexico:

--Oigan, entonces si ya pertenecemos al Primer Mundo, ¿se va a componer la raza?

--Bueno, si vienen a trabajar obreros norteamericanos y canadienses, es probable que muchos formen familias aquí y entonces sí, la raza se tiene que componer.. (107)

Of course, here the term “la raza” is used to refer to the lower classes and not directly to the racial composition of the country. Nevertheless, it marks the racial and class divisions in Mexico which have not changed at all under NAFTA and these comments

serve as an ironic echo of José Vasconcelos' now somewhat peculiar but at the time, important ideas in his essay "La raza cósmica" which predicted, through the mixture of indigenous and Spanish peoples, the creation of a new race which would over come the Anglo-Saxons. Yet, in spite of all these criticisms, the novel is not simply a condemnation of the excesses of consumption and the short comings of NAFTA.

An interesting aspect of the novel which indicates a certain analytical direction is the fact that the fictional text is accompanied by footnotes which cite sociological, literary and theoretical studies about money, fashion, and other aspects of modernity. (Some examples are: *La société de consommation* by Jean Baudrillard, *Todo lo sólido desvanece en el aire* by Marshall Berman, *Psicosociología de la moda* by Marc-Alain Descamps) In this way, Loeza shows that her novel, which could be read simply as a very convincing criticism of the frivolity and emptiness of the Mexican upper class, is something more. While in many ways a condemnation of specific Mexican social problems, the book is in other ways a study of a specific example of a modern, global situation. Even as Loeza laments the loss of traditional "Mexican" identity in the face of consumer society she forces us to question the possibility of returning to or defending what is left of that identity. From this point of view, the book serves as a record of the Mexican upper class's anguished search for a new, modern, global identity which can express its "mexicaness" in new forms and new versions of old forms that have lost their traditional power. As García Canclini says:

Las naciones y las etnias siguen existiendo. El problema clave no parece ser el riesgo de que las arrase la globalización, sino entender cómo se reconstituyen las identidades étnicas, regionales y nacionales en proceso de hibridación intercultural. (13)

Both Novo and Loeza recognize the constructed nature of Mexican national identity during the twentieth century and they both try to understand and direct the process of international hybridization of this identity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Novo sees that identity as trapped in the "fundamentalist" version and sees tools in the imported North American consumer culture, which can be used to liberate Mexican identity from that trap. At the end of the twentieth century, Loeza sees that same consumer culture as the dangerous trap. Although she does not offer any solutions she does indicate the direction such a solution should follow: leave the consumer lifestyle behind in order to confront concrete ecological and social problems.

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