



wikimedia.org

Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico City.

Will Straw*

It all began in the Zona Rosa

My first visit to Mexico City—and to UNAM— was in March of 1994. I had just moved back from Ottawa to Montreal to take up a position at McGill University, in the program in which I had done my PhD. Sometime in late 1993, a former student telephoned me and said she was now working in the cultural section of the Canadian Embassy in Mexico. They were organizing events to celebrate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Canada and Mexico. Would I like to visit, the former student asked. I eagerly accepted.

On this first trip to Mexico City, I stayed in a hotel in the Zona Rosa that faced onto the Paseo de la Reforma. Friends in Montreal who claimed a deep knowledge of the city warned me that this was far from the “real” city of ordinary people, and, indeed, the street at this time seemed to me at the time to be full of bars aimed at businessmen and offices housing international corporations. Nevertheless, I was impressed by the majesty of La Reforma, and by

buildings whose signs indicated that they were the headquarters for important newspapers and other media. As a media corridor, La Reforma seemed emblematic of a twentieth century metropolitan modernity which had always fascinated me, but which would be very soon threatened by the slow decline of print media and the rise of their digital equivalents.

I never again stayed in the Zona Rosa, but in the thirty years since my first trip, and particularly on recent visits, I have developed a fascination for the neighborhood. A handful of recent books telling the history of the city’s nightlife (both above and below ground) have given me a greater appreciation of the Zona Rosa’s longtime status as a place of moral transgression and experimentation. (In 1977, A lurid two-page article in the *nota roja* (red note)¹ periodical *Crimen* named the Zona Rosa, Reforma, la Merced and other adjacent districts as Mexico City’s *Ghetto del Sexo* (Sex Ghetto). Today, as the areas separating the Zona Rosa from gentrified enclaves like Colonia Roma become filled in with hipster businesses, and as the surrounding Juárez neighborhood is declared one of the city’s

* Will is a Professor of Urban Media Studies at McGill University; you can contact him at william.straw@mcgill.ca.

“hottest” new districts, one wonders how the Zona Rosa will be seen in a decade or two.

In 1994, not far from my hotel, I found a shop below street level (now long gone) specializing in imported dance music records, but saw few other signs of subcultural ferment. I learned on later trips that the cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis was an habitué of the antique market located in the Plaza del Ángel, and so began going there on a regular basis, though the furniture and housewares in which the market specialized were of little use to me. I preferred the flea markets (the Lagunilla and, in recent years, the Mercado Jardin Pushkin) in which I might find the sorts of things—old magazines and movie posters—which were more easily transported home. In the late 1990s, through the kindness of Arturo Saucedo, I was able to meet with Carlos Monsiváis and the well-known cartoonist El Fisgón for a conversation at a VIPS restaurant on La Reforma. Both men, kindly and patiently, explained their love for the Zona Rosa and its importance in Mexico City’s cultural history.

On this first trip to Mexico I gave a talk titled Popular Music in Canada, at the Universidad Anáhuac. I know this from my cv but I have no memory of giving the talk, nor of the place in which I gave it, though a version of the text, converted from WordPerfect to Word in the early 2000s, suggests it had a lot to do with public policies intended to support Canadian music. My other presentation, titled Canadian Cultural Identity: Film and Music was given at the Center for Research on North America (CISAN). This visit to UNAM was the first in several dozen which have transpired over the last three decades. All of them have been among the most enjoyable and stimulating occasions of my life. I remember almost nothing of the discussion which followed this talk in March, 1994. I was overwhelmed by meeting so many fascinating people and by the warm welcome accorded me. It was here that I met a young scholar of Canadian culture named Graciela Martínez-Zalce and began a cherished friendship which has marked and transformed my life in so many ways.

I returned to Mexico City in the same year, in June, for a conference and film festival with the title *La identidad canadiense a través de su cine* (The Canadian Identity through Its Cinema) Foolishly, on neither this nor the first trip did I bring a camera or take photographs. (I had probably been warned by cautious Canadians not to carry items that might tempt thieves.) And so my memories of these first visits are reduced to hazy mental images: of stand-

As these relationships expanded,
and as our careers advanced, more
and more students and teachers in both
places were drawn into networks—some
already existing, some new—in which
research topics moved back and forth.

ing outside the Ghandi bookstore on the main square in Coyoacán, holding newly purchased books by Monsiváis (of whose importance I had just learned); of a dinner with colleagues in one of those fabulous restaurants, probably in San Ángel, which resembled those I had seen in old movies set in Mexico City; of my first view of the Centro Histórico and the Zócalo.

As I write these paragraphs, I have before me a copy of the book *¿Sentenciados al aburrimiento?: tópicos de cultura canadiense* (Sentenced to Boredom?: Topics of Canadian Culture), edited by Graciela Martínez-Zalce. It is noteworthy for being the first volume of scholarship on Canadian culture published in the Spanish language. The book stands out, as well, because it paid attention to cinema and music alongside the more consecrated cultural forms of literature, theatre and painting. We might see this book, now, as part of a broader opening of Canadian cultural studies to include the popular, but it seems as well, in retrospect, as a guide to the range of topics that Dr. Martinez-Zalce and I—and our many collaborators—would explore together in the decades to come. The book’s witty title (“Sentenced to boredom?”) both referenced longstanding, stereotypical views of English-Canadian culture and, in its derivation from a Leonard Cohen song, pointed to one of the most internationally beloved (and certainly not boring) figures in Canadian culture.

For me, as one of those who contributed to the volume, *¿Sentenciados al aburrimiento?* is a reminder of how quickly exchanges and collaborations between Mexican and Canadian scholars took shape. Very soon after my second visit to Mexico City, Dr. Martínez-Zalce came on the first of several visits to McGill University, as a visiting scholar in the Graduate Program in Communications and in the Centre for Research in Canadian Cultural Industries and Institutions (of which I was Director.) Two doctoral students in the Graduate Program in Communications (Lynne Darroch and Scott McKenzie) contributed essays to *¿Sentenciados al aburrimiento?*, and we all travelled to CISAN for

the launch of the book in 1996. In the same year, El Colegio de México provided funding for a study of the popular music industries in Canada, the United States and Mexico, and Dr. Martínez-Zalce and I added the American scholar Steve Jones to our roster of collaborators.

The specific motives and resources underlying these exchanges are less important, perhaps, than the enduring relationships of friendship and collaboration which they set in place. As these relationships expanded, and as our careers advanced, more and more students and teachers in both places were drawn into networks—some already existing, some new—in which research topics moved back and forth. In these movements, Mexican *nota roja* might become the object of a doctoral dissertation defended at McGill and Canadian cinema would be the focus of PhD work undertaken at UNAM. At the same time, the ongoing, important literary scholarship of Claudia Lucotti and others in UNAM's Facultad de Filosofía y Letras pursued an interest in the literary expression of writers working in French, English and Indigenous languages in the territories commonly called Canada. I was struck by the steady passage between groups of literary scholars located across UNAM, but working on Canadian literatures, and the rich, transformative research on Canadian cultures taking place within the Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte. CISAN's capacity to bring these people together, in

dialogue with people from elsewhere has long been one of its greatest strengths. I have met more German or American Canadianists at CISAN than in their respective countries of origin.

Among the many effects of this first trip to Mexico City is one I have realized only recently. My collaborations with scholars at UNAM (and principally at CISAN) led me to identify more and more as someone working in the field of Canadian Studies. To be sure, I had already been engaged in studying elements of Canadian culture (like films, music and public policies) prior to 1994, but I did so as part of a broader interest in popular culture in its international dimensions. It was through my exchanges and collaborations with researchers at CISAN (and, most notably, Dr. Martínez-Zalce) that I came to see more and more of my work as dealing with the “predicaments” of Canadian culture.

Early on, these “predicaments” were those of a popular culture produced for a small population, by industries based, for the most part, in the United States (and sometimes France or Great Britain). (When I first went to Mexico City, its population was roughly equivalent to that of Canada as a whole.) Exchanges with Mexican colleagues allowed me to think of the condition of Canadian cultures outside of frameworks in which the only pertinent question was that of our relationship with the United States.



Genova street, Pink Zone, Mexico City.

The dialogue between
Canada and Mexico encouraged a more
pluralized vision of culture, one which
constantly forced us to question the
frameworks and concepts we
brought to our work.

It was not simply that Mexico added one more context in which to trace the movement and understanding of Canadian culture. More broadly, the dialogue between Canada and Mexico encouraged a more pluralized vision of culture, one which constantly forced us to question the frameworks and concepts we brought to our work. In our ongoing collaboration and exchange our research became increasingly (and, it must be admitted, belatedly) conscious of the traumas of colonial settlement, the threats facing indigenous or minority languages and the folly of seeking to define national cultures in essentialist terms.

Thirty years of travelling to Mexico City do not authorize me to call myself a “Mexicanist,” an authority on Mexican culture. Nevertheless, from my first excitement at seeing the signs of newspaper buildings on La Reforma through innumerable visits to the bookstores and flea markets of Mexico City, I have developed a profound fascination with what might be called the “city of words.” This interest has followed the growth of my fascination with the popular press in Mexico, and, in particular, with its sensational and popular dimensions. This fascination encompasses several genres and subgenres of periodical, most of them from the second half of the twentieth century. In the course of my many trips to Mexico City, I became familiar with crime newspapers (like *Alarma*, *Alerta*, *Nota Roja*, *Magazine de Policia*, *Crimen!*, *Justicia!*), entertainment papers (like *Escandalosa* or *Orbita*); and periodicals mixing sports, celebrity news, human interest stories (like *El Figaro*, *Ay...!*, *Vedetes y Deportes*), various kinds of comics and *fotonovela*, and ephemeral forms like guides to the nightlife of Mexico City in the 1960s. Over the past fifteen years, I have posted the covers of hundreds of these periodicals on my website, “Print Culture and Urban Sensation”² and the most rewarding responses have come from Mexican scholars or collectors who have written with questions or expressions of appreciation.

Among the many reasons for this interest are the instructive parallels I have found between the popular

periodical culture of Mexico City and that of Montreal, Quebec, where I live. The publishing industries of both places have been shaped by a complex relationship (of imitation and differentiation) vis-à-vis the popular culture of the United States of America. The *fotonovela* (or *photo-roman*) and small sized, soft covered books of short fiction (what are called *romans en fascicules* in Quebec) are among the popular forms of print culture produced in Mexico and Quebec but these had few equivalents in 20th century English Canada or the United States. As well, the popular print culture of both Mexico and Quebec has long occupied an uncertain relationship to cultural legitimacy. Ignored and uncollected for so long, the popular periodicals and books of both places now find themselves the focus of growing interest on the part of cultural scholars. In both Mexico and Quebec, patrimonial institutions like national libraries, which overlooked such materials for so long, now rush to build collections of them.

I will never be an expert on areas of Mexican culture in the way that my colleagues at CISAN have become authorities on the cultures of Canada. If our collaborations of thirty years remain, for me, rich and productive, it is because they have moved beyond (and, indeed, never involved) a simply comparative phase in which we each brought to the table the cultural treasures of our own location and noted their differences and similarities. I go to Mexico City to learn, from the scholars at CISAN, about the role of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in fostering ideas of literary value among its audiences. I return to Montreal with this knowledge, but also with examples of Mexican popular culture which I will attempt to explain to the students in my seminar on “Media and Urban Life.”

In this back and forth, and in the endless openings and new insights which have resulted, my life and career have been much richer and marked by greater joy than if I had not received that telephone call in late 1993. To CISAN, to its wonderful personnel, to the past Directors I have known and its wonderful current Director, Dr. Martínez-Zalce, I offer congratulations on thirty five years of marvellous work. ■■■

▼
Notes

¹ Bloody news related to violence, crimes, accidents and natural disasters. [Editor's Note.]

² <https://willstraw.com/print-culture-and-urban-sensationalism/>.