Question: There are ten authors included in the volume, but what is your chapter about?

Christopher Chávez: I think each of the authors in this anthology is exploring the nature of collective identity in a rapidly changing world. My chapter looks at the topic from an institutional point of view. Specifically, I was interested in how the global advertising industry conceives of and represents physical and social space. Looking specifically at the construction of a global Latino consumer segment, I find it interesting that advertising corporate discourses are not at all unique from discursive mechanisms that have historically been used by colonial powers. In the same way that military powers used maps and censuses to imagine their dominion, global advertising agencies have constructed a version of Latin America that serves their strategic and economic needs.

Q: After having sifted carefully through and edited these ten chapters drawn from the conference devoted to the topic of identity, what (briefly!) can you tell us constitutes identity?

CC: I think that the maxim, “who I am depends on the groups to which I belong” certainly holds true. I firmly believe that identity is a socially constructed phenomenon, but after spending a lot of time with each of
these essays, I was struck by how much identity construction is a contested and mediated process. Both Brian’s essay on the news media’s coverage of the British riots and Arne’s essay on “foreign” cinema clearly demonstrate how the ideal of a singular national identity often involves a process of exclusion. On the other hand, Meteo’s essay on the Spanish national fútbol team illustrates how regional identities can persist in the face of nationalizing forces. In short, I appreciate more how identity is never static and necessarily involves a process of struggle and defiance.

Q: In editing a book for the first time, were there any surprises in the process? What did you find most rewarding?

CC: Overall, I’m really proud of the collection that Brian and I put together and I am particularly proud that the text represents voices from all over the world and includes authors who explore identity in a variety of contexts. From Iranian bloggers to modern, Jewish matchmaking in Israel, this anthology explores identity from a truly non-North American perspective.

As a first-time editor of a project on this scale, I learned a lot about the process. For me, it was a challenge to find the right balance between respecting the author’s voice while pushing them to strengthen and clarify their arguments. I was also surprised at how much scholarly range is required of an editor of a text which draws from a variety of theoretical traditions and employs a range of methodologies. In an effort to provide informed feedback, I had to become somewhat proficient in that literature. After this experience, I have a much stronger appreciation for the role of editor.
Q: You also furnished the striking cover photo image for the volume. Would you like to say more about it and what it means in the framework of the book's content?

I took the photo when I was teaching in Madrid during the summer of 2011 and was present during the demonstrations that were occurring in the Puerto del Sol. I remember being struck by the use of visually imagery to achieve a variety of objectives such as expressing outrage, invoking moral authority and providing a thoughtful critique of power. It was fascinating to see how cultural symbols were appropriate were re-appropriated and it very much reminded me of what Eco’s terms “semiotic guerrilla warfare.” For example, the image of Goya’s “Saturn devouring his son” crystallized institutional abuses of power while commercial advertisements were subverted in order to critique capitalism itself. At the same time, the plaza itself is a visual representation of changing identity. New public spaces are built on the foundations of the old and often these two worlds collide. I think it deals with the same issues that we explore in this book.

Q: Excluding the chapters composed by the co-editors (i.e., you and me), what chapter in the book was the one that tickled you the most in terms of learning something new as a reader?

CC: I think Antonio’s essay on how British teenage girls engage one another on Facebook is provocative on several levels. First, Antonio’s study challenges a lot of utopian claims about how social media enhances interpersonal interactions. By showing the dark side of social media, Antonio does a masterful job of demonstrating how technology can also facilitate very negative and anti-social relationships. At the same time, it’s
hard to remain emotionally detached from the subject matter itself. I recognize that un-civil discourse has always been a part of teen culture, but I really was struck by the toxicity of some of these interactions. Cyber-bullying has become such a visible topic as of late and I found myself genuinely concerned about the well-being of these teens.

Q: Now that *Identity* is in print as of July, what are you working on now in terms of big projects?

CC: Lately, I’ve been writing more about the changing television landscape in the U.S. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of regional, national and global television networks. As a result, television today seems like a space of convergence and more like a sub-cultural forum. I am interested in the possibilities here for marginalized groups and I have been working on several pieces that examine the emergence of new cable stations that target African American and Latino audiences. While these networks have the potential to serve as spaces for African American and Latino cultural production, I am interested in how they can fulfill an important social role within the constraints of marketplace dynamics.