

## THE PERSISTENCE OF THE NATIONAL

My comments today derive in part from (“Where Am I at Home?: The Interplay of National, Local, and Aesthetic Space,” an essay I wrote for Michael Dear and Gustavo Leclerc, published in their book *Postborder City: Cultural Spaces of Baja California* (New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 217-248). For that piece, I interviewed two mid-career artists Daniel Joseph Martínez from Southern California and Ramón Tamayo from Baja California. I wanted to use their accounts to explore what it means to say that Martínez is an American artist and Tamayo is a Mexican artist. I will summarize my argument in that piece and then extend it to consider what the conclusions I drew might suggest about literature as a marker of the nation and writing as a way of communicating across national borders.

Academic art history emerged as nation states asserted their sovereignty over territories and populations, and the discipline has typically organized courses around efforts to define the characteristics over time of each nation’s cultural production. A national history organized around a sequence of writers, painters, and composers arose to complement a political history centered on kings, generals, presidents, and statesmen. The modern arts movements that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century however more typically stressed the universal, trans-national aspects of creative process. Art helped people translate across the dizzying variety of actual custom and convention to find what they shared as human beings. Art unites what borders and politics keep apart and thus must reveal a deeper, more persistent layer of reality than the ephemeral world of current affairs.

Modern cultural institutions have long been organized around both national and international axes, which are difficult, perhaps impossible to disentangle. Arts institutions around the world mount international exhibitions because they serve the broader educational functions of galleries, museums, and schools defined on a national level. Such programs create images of distinct national cultures as apparent facts, they chart an imaginary topography of universal similarities and historical differences, and they define a place for the homeland within an imaginary global culture. The same piece of work reads differently in a museum gallery in San Diego and Tijuana.

My essay explored the practical implications for artists working in both a national and an international framework. The profession of art encourages the idea that art is everywhere the same but the national structures are indeed different. U.S. and Mexican educational and cultural institutions have distinct histories, organizational forms, funding sources, and priorities for what they do. They respond to different conceptions of nation and art, even as they engage in collaborations.

By focusing on homologous narrative motifs as expressed by two artists from adjacent nations, I aimed to clarify processes by which many contemporary artists achieve professional status and recognition within specific national contexts that are also always internationalized. How artists like Daniel Joseph Martínez and Ramón Tamayo resolve the sometimes conflicting demands of their national, local, and professional identities will contribute to establishing the parameters for a “post-border” culture still in emergence as artists respond to the pressures of the time by participating in the imagination of a world that’s expanding and inclusive. Their work, as that of many artists, aims to create a new imaginary, in Martínez’s words, “to temporarily transform the environment and alter perceptions.”

The presence of well-developed educational infrastructures marked the historical moment of both artists' entrance into their professional careers. That was not accidental, as the growth of schools at all levels was a result of policy decisions and significant investments in both Mexico and the United States accumulating over decades. The careers of Tamayo and Martínez took the form they did because modern democratic societies have made education a priority and over the long term have expanded access to schools and increased the length of time students spend acquiring advanced skills. In the contemporary world, to become an artist generally means going to an institution of higher learning that socializes its students to participate in professions.

In Mexico, with more limited fiscal resources, government has acted directly and nearly exclusively to ensure educational structures that can nurture the intellectual and creative potential of its citizenry. Tamayo is a success story that shows how well Mexico has done along these lines, but as he was well aware in our interview, there are many talented, bright men of his age for whom the system did not work. In the United States, despite immense wealth, the educational system fails many, perhaps most talented young people of color. In Martínez's case the starved resources of inner-city schools were more than compensated for by his landing in a well-funded private school whose students largely though not exclusively came from wealthy backgrounds.

In the cases of Tamayo and Martínez, the educational systems functioned well enough that they did leap across barriers of class to become professional artists. In both their situations, the university proved to be the central, the essential institution that could recognize and promote their talent. In (Alta) California, much richer and with a more fully developed civil society, private schools are as important as state institutions, but in both Californias, the state has made university-level education an on-going, long-term fiscal priority. Sizable investments by the

citizens of the two states enable both Tamayo and Martínez to secure employment and pursue art careers that would be much more difficult to sustain had they to rely on sales of their work for survival.

University-level education has become an essential underpinning for contemporary practice of the fine arts. It provides structures for recognizing young talent, while developing and testing their skills. That modern societies put such priority on developing the potential of the young provides positions for mature artists whose careers then are defined in part by service to the educational functions of the nation-state.

However, higher education in the United States and Mexico are not identical, even if externals are remarkably similar. It is the internal structures that reveal different priorities and a distinct conception of the relation of the educated citizen to society at large. The Mexican nation, with an annual per capita domestic production that is only one-sixth of the United States', has focused more sharply on a few key goals for its educational institutions. Unlike the U.S. university with its dozens of departments, institutes, and centers, the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, founded in 1957, has a much simpler structure. There are only a handful of faculties at the Mexicali campus primarily specializing in technical subjects. Resources have been directed to the most pressing practical needs of the state. Graduates needing advanced training will go to Mexico City or, possibly, to a foreign university. Education has been shaped around a strategy of building wealth in the hopes of raising the standard of living. Everything else is secondary. The narrative that the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California provides its students stresses education as a way of serving the larger community, though at times that noble goal may seem to be diminished into technocratic service to the multinational corporations that increasingly dominate Mexico's northern border communities.

As Tamayo's position at the university indicates, arts and literature are certainly not absent from campus life. Indeed they seemed more visible, more integrated into the life of the school, than on any U.S. campus where I have taught, but courses related to the arts are offered as electives for personal improvement or recreational diversion. They are organized in conjunction with a variety of student clubs that provide resources for exploring theater, video, painting, photography, and music, including access to equipment most students cannot afford. Arts classes are open as well to the broader community as part of the general service the university provides to the citizens of the state, services that include regular arts festivals, concerts, and theater productions. The structure of the arts on campus conveys a straightforward message that they are vital aspects of personal enrichment and intellectual development, but they are to be private rather than professional interests.<sup>1</sup>

The U.S. university developed around a dual set of goals: providing undergraduates with a broad liberal arts education and graduate students with professional training for positions in the law, medicine, business, or education. Studio art and theater programs grew slowly until the post-World War II period when they became universal in colleges and universities. The mark of maturity for any field is the development of graduate programs that provide advanced degrees. In most cases, the holders of those degrees will find jobs teaching at another school, helping to perpetuate the field as a subject of learning and participating in the reproduction of a leadership group whose expertise rests on a theorized understanding of the field's practice. For studio art to function as an equal on campus, art could no longer be considered a vocation or calling. Art became instead a field of research, in which critical and theoretical perspectives are more important than practical skills.

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<sup>1</sup> In May 2003, the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California created a new Faculty of Arts to add practical and professional courses while continuing public programs for the general student body and the off-campus community.

Criticality has become a defining feature of contemporary art as a professional endeavor in the United States and certainly elsewhere. A mature culture institutes for itself a defined zone for disengagement, self-reflection, and auto-critique, which can be directed against aesthetic theory, the forms that art takes, the epistemology of vision and performance, the commodification of art objects or processes, or the structures of symbolic power that are proposed for defining a social entity such as a nation. Within a professionalized art discourse, the use of aesthetic rather than social science theory to discuss political or social phenomena carries no implications about the nature of the realities that theories describe. It merely locates the discussion as taking place within an established institutional framework that has narrowed the terms of reference so that insights particular to that field can be deepened.

Differences between university structures and the place of the arts in university education reflect disparities in social resources as well as the relatively younger history of higher education in Baja California. They also express different conceptions of the relation of the individual to the nation. Mexican education stresses raising collective technical capacities, while U.S. education puts higher priority on individual development. The goals are not foreign to each other. Indeed, they are so easily translatable that one could easily think that the nature of educational structures reflects only financial realities rather than distinctive goals. However, the structures that universities have taken channel activity and provide guidelines for evaluating outcomes. The importance of this for everyday practice in the arts can be tested in assessing the projects that Martínez and Tamayo have developed to engage local communities, in other words, the projects they have undertaken in order to critique the nations that formed them.

The danger for anyone, artist or not, who lives in a provincial environment is an assumption that there are inadequate resources for activities, which to be done well must be done

elsewhere. The challenge is to escape the self-censorship that accompanies provincialization. “*We do theater,*” Tamayo said, “*but we have no theater, no lights. We accept the conditions that we have.*” [TAPE 2] His method is to be able to perform even in the most limited conditions, even if there is only one person available to present a play. The “actors” for his one-performer version of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* are Leggo figures and plastic toy dolls that he bought at the *tianguis*. The performer moves the figures on top of a portable table while shifting from voice to voice. As products of commercial culture, the characters are grounded in readily recognizable cultural icons that his audiences can easily identify—in this case Merlin, a Star Trek figure, and a Ninja warrior who served as the Aviator.

The goal is to refocus the theater experience onto the immediate presence of other human beings and what they can suggest with vocal and movement gestures: “*Every person carries everything needed for theater in and on his own person.*” [TAPE 2] If all the resources needed for creativity are always at hand, then “lack of resources” can never be a reason for not creating. The university subsidizes Tamayo’s projects as part of its service to the people of the state, providing a relatively secure environment for his exploration of an innovative idea that bureaucratically can be readily understood as cultural recreation.

His sculpture likewise has served dual purposes that mix art and public service. Like any visual artist, he explores plastic form in a variety of media and then exhibits the completed work at museums and galleries. At the same time, these forms have been redesigned for an experiment conducted by the engineering and architecture faculties at UABC to create controlled microclimates in child care centers. Hooked up with water conduits and placed in relation to shade trees, his sculptures will provide space where children can play and enjoy themselves outside during the summer, when the thermometer is usually above 40 degrees Celsius. The

project is not expensive, and the planners hope it will offer a prototype for providing schools in low desert areas throughout Mexico and the Southwest United States with practical play space that is moist and cool.

While Tamayo has defined his project by a commitment to one city and one state, Martínez has typically created projects far from his home town of Los Angeles, where the ubiquity of art is such that even the most provocative piece will disappear into a plethora of stimulation provided in one of the true world cities, the very kind of metropolitan center that may be sucking the creative life out of countless cities like Mexicali. His projects have taken a wide variety of forms: films, video, photographs, opera, street theater, but his best-known work has been a series of public art installations that took seriously the challenge of connecting art to immediate concerns of everyday life in particular locations. He could enter a local community as a relative outsider, listen to what people had to say, and then try to create a situation where communication between opposed viewpoints would have to happen. For taking his role as a public intellectual seriously, he has gained a reputation as a difficult artist, paradoxically seeming to confirm the alienation of art from life, a central ideological tenet guaranteeing the privileged position of fine arts institutions.

The most dramatic and ultimately validating response to Martínez's work happened at Cornell University in 1993, when he was commissioned to do a site-specific piece for an exhibition of Chicano art. He was reading in psychogeography at the time, particularly examining the writings of Guy Debord and the situationists on the May 1968 events in France. As he looked over the maps of how students and intellectuals set up barricades around the Sorbonne and effectively took over Paris and brought the whole nation to a halt, the paths around



the Cornell campus reminded him of the streets surrounding the Sorbonne. He proposed erecting barriers to block movement around campus. This led to *The Castle Is Burning*, a title taken from graffiti in Paris in 1968, but to many at Cornell an obvious reference to the castle-like administration building overlooking the campus.

“Privilege is articulated through use of architecture and space,” he told me as he described the project. “So I thought I’m just going to mess it up a little bit. I’m going to overlay the exact pattern of barricades in Paris over the Cornell campus...I took the arts quad and I created a wall across the whole thing. I made a barricade out of ‘black ice.’ It was as beautiful as a Reinhardt. But I created a line across the panels. When the snow hit the ground behind the wall, the light hit the snow and bounced up and created a luminescent line across the whole thing....The real question is private/public. It was a way for me to create disorder. Maybe people misunderstood me. The panels that made words above started to be destroyed.”

After he returned to Los Angeles, a group of conservative students announced their intention to destroy it. Four hundred other students, mostly students of color, formed a human chain around the work to defend it. Following a battle between the student groups, there was a student occupation of the administration building. The university’s passivity in the face of vandalism directed against a work by an artist of color was symptomatic of the administration’s refusal to acknowledge, much less address, a long-standing pattern of intimidation against students and faculty of color. Access to higher education meant only being present on campus but not being included. Students demanded hiring of more faculty of color, building library collections in ethnic studies, and changing the curriculum to address the interests and needs of students of color. Martínez recalled that the president blamed him for the situation rather than looking at how the university’s policies created a hostile racial climate at Cornell: “Individuals

like Martínez will be the demise of western civilization.’ Wow! Just one little person. It was like the servants taking over the house. You can’t have that.”

In the end, student demands were met and the president resigned as a result of his failure to manage the confrontation. Since 1993, Chicano students at Cornell continue to celebrate the anniversary of the Day Hall takeover and honor the inspiration they or their antecedents received from *The Castle Is Burning*. “And what is it?” Daniel asked. “Just a little bit of art, a hope, an idea. I laid the plans out. They picked it up, read the plan, and enacted it. A sleeping giant lies at your feet and you don’t even know it. An exceptional event, an exceptional moment.”

That Martínez’s public art projects have so consistently generated intense public response suggests how well his work functions as research confronting the languages and subject-positions that the discursive regimes available have created for contemporary Americans to occupy. He begins with a proposition that whatever is said silences and his task as a poet is to return the absented, not for meaning to be overturned and replaced by nonsense, but precisely in order that the social relationships embedded in local, everyday language situations be revealed with crystalline clarity. He devalues the “real” as a shadow, which means that he must create an art that is “true” because it is not reducible to anything immediate.

No doubt Tamayo has foregone opportunities for money and recognition that might have otherwise have been available had he left Mexicali to work in Mexico City. No doubt the turmoil surrounding Martínez’s projects has exacted a personal toll. Still, both have good jobs at major universities. Both lecture widely, and both continue to exhibit on an international basis. Their reputations rest on their roles as public intellectuals who transform local spaces by a professional practice. The national context in each case shapes a distinctive conception of art as

a profession. Tamayo engages the immediate locality served by his university in part because he works within a cultural framework organized around ideals of public service, personal enrichment, and cultural recreation. Martínez intervenes in local situations that are not his in part because the U.S. university gives priority to conceptions of art as research and thus supports autonomous professional development. Yet in both cases, art practice as sponsored within national university environments arrives at very similar results: work that reconstructs the immediate to allow the possibility for imagining alternatives.

Contemporary experimental art practice is defined by a goal of creating imaginative space that can transcend immediate social realities, be they national or local. The professional and disciplinary autonomy of arts practices and institutions has been a relative condition enabling artists to reveal to their fellow citizens alternative modes of perception. Autonomy is relative because, even if creative expression is universal, the organization and goals of cultural institutions are not. These are products of national histories differentially expressed in a variety of regional and local contexts. Innovative art practice that aims to provide alternative perceptions of social and political realities must simultaneously critique, negate, and transcend immediate structures for professional practice—be they of either a research or a public service model—if imaginative space that counters settled perceptual and cognitive habits is to materialize.

For Daniel, working to reveal what he calls a “third” space where the absented truths of national, local, and institutional structures become palpably present has led him to what appears to be an iconoclastic or even nihilistic position. The response to his work has been such that he has developed a reputation as a “wild animal” whose ideas might be well-meaning but are suspect and possibly irresponsible. Publicly funded arts exhibitions need to satisfy two

conflicting demands, “excellence” and “accessibility.” Martínez satisfies the first demand, but the questions he raises challenge a comfortable relationship to art. He tried to export conversations that are relevant and serious among professionals and show why they were relevant to broader publics, including the communities from which he originally came. He showed that art can provoke discussion and debate, but in a way that questioned the need for professional control.

The meaningful audience for Daniel’s work, however, has been primarily professionals, who then mediate the ways in which the broader public hear of what Daniel has done. Even at Cornell, where students of color showed themselves to be the responsible ideal audience artists dream of reaching, an audience that knew how to respond and act upon the events that art made visible and understandable, they themselves were professionals in training, pondering in an alienating campus environment the existential meaning of the histories of communities of color within the United States. Higher education trains those who will become the leaders of the country (and hence putatively of the globe) in thirty years. To grasp that privilege, students of color have to learn how to convert apparent marginality into strategic assets. Daniel’s work provided an important object lesson for the training of new professional cadre who *may* bring into being a world where categories of race *begin* to be less decisive in determining individual fate. In this sense, Daniel has contributed to a on-going nation-building project that allows the U.S. state to endure and indeed expand because state and civil society become increasingly self-conscious and self-reflective about the conditions of their emergence and consolidation.

The marginal, and therefore productive position that artists have found in modern social life brings to mind the seminal essay from 1928 by Robert E. Park, “Human Migration and the

Marginal Man.” This is one of the first theoretical texts that posits hybridity and border-crossing as explanatory factors behind the political and economic power of the United States. Park, the principal figure in the sociology department at the University of Chicago, rebuffed fellow Anglo-Americans who naively believed that either religious or racial purity could have been the foundation of the greatness the United States enjoyed. Ten years later in a follow-up essay, he wrote, “Inevitably [the marginal man] becomes, relative to his cultural milieu, the individual with a wider horizon, the keener intelligence, the more detached and rational view-point. The marginal man is always relatively the more civilized human being.”

Innovation is the product of those who stand at the margins and are most easily able to move between cultures. In the twentieth century, the innovators would move between races as well as cultures. They were mulattos and mestizos in the Americas and Eurasians in the old world. Given the racial and ethnic politics of the United States in the 1920s, Park’s argument could have had little immediate practical effect in his own country, but he helped prepare the ground for changes decades later. His arguments found a more receptive readership among Latin American intellectuals such as Manuel Gamio. Park’s formulations challenged stereotypes that the primary impediment to progress in Mexico had been the mass of impoverished Indian or mixed-blood peasants. If Park were right, the primary force for modernization would be found in communities that appeared marginal. They needed access to a technical education that would provide skills for solving themselves their most basic problems.

In the Latin American situation, Park’s concept of “marginal man” escaped its initial racial and ethnic setting however to take into account differing levels of education and social mobility. The marginal man was the individual who could move between the value systems of his indigenous roots and the scientific and technological knowledge available from the broader

world. His productivity rested in his becoming marginal to both and thus able to cobble together a creative understanding of the world. His imagination worked with the fragments of diverse cultural legacies, both within and without his homeland, to bricolage a picture of the world that was open to innovation and invention. The marginal man's example augmented the possibilities for others to dissent from the groups which insisted on social solidarity as the basis for either national or local progress.

Ramón's strategies for creativity directly confront the limitations of being part of a nation that is relatively poor and that has long made concentration of wealth and talent the central strategy for national development. He builds on alternative traditions within Mexico that have focused instead on strengthening local talent. Following this strategy, the chief resource for progress lies within each human person, and Ramón's efforts contribute to national welfare to the degree that he succeeds in challenging students, colleagues, and audiences to think more deeply about their marginality as a potential rather than as a liability.

Ramón's students will likely be the agronomists, engineers, chemists, doctors, architects, and public officials of the state in the future. The process trains them that the local must be valued and protected, that Mexicali can develop things of worth and take them to other parts of the world. A few may redirect their careers as Ramón himself had done. Mexicali, with nearly one million residents, is home to more people than Athens, Florence, Venice, or Amsterdam had during their golden ages. Unless we hold that the distribution of talent in the human race has shrunk radically in the last several centuries, Mexicali should be as vital an intellectual and aesthetic center as these cities have been. It would be but one of many, but its ambitious, talented citizens would no longer think automatically of migrating to Mexico City, or Los Angeles, or New York, or even to Tijuana, which has lately been developing into the metropolis

of the Mexican Northwest. Cultural capitals are concentrations of mercantile opportunities. Culture in this sense is defined by the size of the market for consumption rather than by the potential for creativity.

Tamayo works in hope of a renaissance, the rebirth of which involves a network of local sites, in exchange and interaction, but each developing the rich potential that the imaginations and talents of their populations already possess. Mexicali is provincialized when its leaders assume that the practical tasks of nation building require the city to develop primarily for maquiladora production. *“To include everybody is not a characteristic of contemporary culture,” [TAPE 4]* he believes. That distribution of labor, which then drives the educational process, inevitably directs many residents away from their homes in order to find opportunity. As a nationalist, he says, *“More than to protect Mexican culture, I want to share it, take it out, and let others enjoy it.” [TAPE 5]*

Tamayo has defined his work with theater form as a practice of anti-spectacle. The theater practitioner, be she performer or director, relearns the resources that she as an individual can master and deploy to a small, intimate audience. To embrace the anti-spectacle is to accept the inevitability of limitations in any human situation and make one’s marginality the basis for exploring what one’s capacities might be in any real situation.

The nation’s structuring role in the careers of Tamayo and Martínez is obvious, but it remains unmarked in their accounts largely or in the ways in which critics discuss them. Art and education appear as if they were the same thing in our two countries. The role of the nation is found in the grammar or syntax and the possibilities that allows. Art as a profession aspires to be a form of universal knowledge that by channeling the human imaginative capacity offers a

challenge to what actually exists, to see what is not yet, but could be.

A highlight of the 1997 in-Site exhibition in San Diego and Tijuana was Marcos Ramírez ERRE's *Toy an Horse*, a thirty-foot tall, two-headed wooden horse straddling the border at San Ysidro, reputedly the most heavily trafficked international frontier crossing in the world. Effecting a clever English-language pun, ERRE called up nativist concerns in the United States that immigration had become a Trojan horse sapping national integrity. ERRE however visually reminded his audience of border-crossers, both U.S. and Mexican citizens, that the horse pointed both directions. If the border symbolized danger, certainly Mexico was as vulnerable as the U.S. to unwanted changes, perhaps more so given its weaker economic condition and the relatively greater fragility of its political structures. The piece asked its viewers who else could be the secreted warriors threatening the future of Mexico and the United States but themselves, the fifty thousand tourists, businessmen, shoppers, government officials, and workers who daily cross the border at San Ysidro.

ERRE's joke from 1997 provided a reminder that interchange between any two nations is a living process involving thousands of discrete acts by people with sundry motivations and intentions. Given that interpretation as a possible reading of the piece, it is necessary nonetheless to remember that the work was produced within a particular social structure that has its own relation to the border. If artists arrive at a telling formulation about borders, nations, and the mixtures they create, this is not because they have reproduced observable facts. Imagination has thrown forth an alternative way of seeing that stands in opposition to what can be observed, as much as ERRE's *Toy an Horse* stood over the actual business of crossing the international border. While it was installed, ERRE's piece in no way changed the process of passing between the U.S. and Mexico, though it may have sparked a variety of interior changes among the



hundreds of thousands who saw it. We do not turn to artists or writers for policy recommendations but for relief, incitement, provocation; they give an alternative that can reduce complex, often intractable realities to images with the power to put ideas back into play.

Art has had a privileged role in cross-border cultural experimentation because most art works are not dependent on language. They appeal more directly to our sensory capacities to provoke ideas and responses, which we will then articulate through conversation and criticism in our respective languages. Literature provides a more difficult challenge for the process of constructing a shared culture across borders. Linguistic communities form markets. The question of what gets translated and thus be shared is governed by a variety of institutions, many commercial, some educational, philanthropic, or governmental. Much, maybe all of the junk of U.S. culture finds its way into the markets of other nations. Very little of either the popular or the high literary culture of Mexico finds an English-language publisher. Certainly the masterpieces of Mexican literature are available and thirty years ago, when Latin American novels were in vogue during the period of the “boom,” they were read reasonably widely. The focus on “great works” is a problem frankly. We in the U.S., I’m speaking now of people who are not specialists, know Mexican literature through *Los de abajo*, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, the poems of Octavio Paz. The novels of Gustavo Sainz or Elena Poniatowska, to speak of only two important novelists who in the U.S. once upon a time were occasionally cited as the literature of “young Mexico” remain mostly untranslated and unknown to the broader reading public, the same for the works of Paco Ignacio Taibo, Elena Garro, Carmen Boullosa, or, well, I could go on with many other names familiar to most of you. Contemporary Mexican culture for the U.S. for the moment is focused almost entirely on Gael García Bernal, who has proven

international box-office appeal, but no one person can or should carry the weight of representing his nation's culture.

What of our regional literature? *Tijuanenses* by Federico Campbell has been translated and published by University of California Press, but not yet *Transpeninsular* or the other evocative works Campbell has written. *Espantapájaros* by Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz is a wonderful book playing with and subverting the conventions of *X-Files* and *Alien*. The novel could indeed be the basis for an entertaining movie saying something most English-speaking North Americans don't hear but in a genre entirely suitable for popular audiences. Its basic storyline focuses on a secret military plan to genetically engineer raptors into highly intelligent, highly lethal secret weapons. Parts of the novel, particularly its use of the border and the role of indigenous peoples in resolving the drama are quite different from what's shown on TV or in the movies in the U.S., but Trujillo Muñoz's approach is fresh, appealing, and consistent with popular taste in both countries. A Hollywood movie based on *Espantapájaros* would be a good sign that a new popular culture might be emerging from the interaction of our two nations. Since 1987, Dr. Trujillo Muñoz has worked with Harry Polkinhorn of San Diego State University to issue volumes of writing from and on the border, published under the imprint of Binational Press/Editorial Binacional, a joint project of San Diego State University and the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California.

Those volumes and that series point in a direction where I think we must go, though university presses have limited resources and their purposes are shaped by the educational missions of their respective schools. The point I want to underscore is what I found most interesting about this series. It gives us *writing* instead of *literature*. People of today share their

thoughts and experiences, their fantasies, fears, and desires. People talk to each other through the printed page, people who are located in specific places that are defined by their nations, connected and separated by a border, groping across the deficiencies of two languages to speak about lives as both an inheritance and a process of self-creation.

I'm defining *writing* as a form of linguistic expression that is by nature ephemeral and situated in historically specific contexts. The problem with literature is that "great books" become metonyms for the nation and a system of signs that mystify life in that nation. *Los de abajo* is not Mexico, any more than *The Great Gatsby* is the United States. As writing they are both wonderful, as literary monuments they participate in substituting national ideologies for shared experiences. I want to turn to another English-language North American writer from the early twentieth century who, I believe, provided a very different example for thinking about culture, either internally to a nation or across the boundaries that nations have erected and political scientists theorized in a process of defining "external enemies."

In his set of twenty-one essays *In the American Grain*, published in 1925, William Carlos Williams savaged the concept of "American literature." There was absolutely nothing of interest to him in the concept and very little of value for contemporary people in the books taught and marketed as the classics of his nation's literature. He proposed instead another concept, "New World writing," which he then used to unfold a story, not only of writers but of men and women of action, players in constructing (or destroying) our nations. By "New World," he certainly was referring to something analogous to José Martí's "nuestra América" but with the idea of once again reintegrating Anglo-America back into the continent which its leaders have defined as alien and threatening. I think by "new world" he also meant something quite distinct: that every

generation, every locale, every community has to create itself as it moves forward, as the systems of social relationships orchestrating the exchanges between different people and different peoples keeps changing. “New world” status is not anything unusual, it is a norm of human existence. Williams also challenged the idea that language ever easily expresses who we are or where we have been, particularly in the Americas, since only a very few of us speak a language that is truly ours. We have to make ours the languages our nations insist define who we are.

Williams’s world in his own writing was neither the United States of America as such, nor the Americas. His standpoint was and remained for his career, the very particular location of Paterson, New Jersey, a working-class factory town where he practiced as a doctor, a *place* that he refused to confuse with imaginary national or transnational *spaces*.

His writing was a way for him to make visible to himself the force fields intersecting all around him in his everyday life. When he spoke of the limitations of language and the difficulties of working with English he started from the very basic fact of his life that the patients who came to see him spoke more than thirty languages at home. They were sick or dying and they had to communicate to him information he needed to make a diagnosis in English, a language that even in the best of circumstances was uncomfortable for them. Often he had to rely on small children to interpret what their relatives were saying. Even when he could speak directly, when patients were native English, Spanish, or French speakers, their use of the language was not the same as his; there was no certainty that they understood each other. The severity of the situation actually made it more likely that misunderstanding, misinterpretation would happen. This cross-cutting multiplicity of language, meaning, intent formed a major strand of Williams’s greatest work *Paterson*, which reads as if written for the world of today, which of course it was, as we are all still floundering in the “national moment.”

In Williams's America, there was no such thing as a language that articulated ideas, feelings, experiences clearly. There was no such thing as a national language that united one and all (except the "internal enemies") into a shared community. The national language was artificial and learned for certain official circumstances where personal fears and desires were to be subordinated to something grand, something so wonderful and mysterious that only it, the Nation, could confer meaning to lives which otherwise would be just random and unstructured. Williams came up with the idea, influenced in part by his exchanges with Octavio Paz as well as his reading in the history of ancient indigenous civilizations, that language is glyphic. Every statement is a glyph, like those of the ancient Maya, Egyptians, or Chinese, that must be decoded for the rules governing its construction also tell you what you are supposed to do, in addition it does not and will not ever convey in and of itself all the information needed in order to know what to do. You have to guess what the secret contents are—whether you are a doctor examining a sick infant, a person crossing the border presenting him- or herself to the border control office, applying for a loan at a bank, or showing up for work and listening to your boss tell you what to do next. Language statements convey images struggling through the words to be decoded. Eloquence itself is a sign that something's wrong, because stuttering is the natural condition of new worlds attempting to come into being, stuttering that generates confused responses that in turn generate both frustration and renewed efforts to say it over again.

It is not generally what language says that will kill you. It is what it cannot say that turns fatal if you fail to pay attention to that which can be known through its *absence*. In addressing the mythologies of his nation, Williams turned to the language situations that his professional associations, both as poet and doctor, provided, and to the very local language communities of Paterson, New Jersey. These imprecise, imperfect and often puzzling languages disrupted the

certainties of the nation. In the local situation, he noted, we don't ever take for granted that language can express our full feelings, we're always struggling with the difficulties of conveying what we want, what we need, what we fear. If this is the case in the most practical, down-to-earth situations, how can the nation's language of symbols and myths, pointing towards a community that is abstract and notional even if powerful, be a more secure, be the most reliable source of meaning?

"New world writing" is that which though touched by national traditions within which people live is no longer constrained by them. The concept of American literature, Williams stated categorically, is a "dead layer" covering "the ground." Where we live everyday is smothered by signs and symbols that claim to be ours but are alien. The poet he noted is a craftsman of language. He or she cannot accept meaning given from "outside one's place." To listen attentively to the languages that are actually used and then to construct a picture of the meanings people are struggling and often failing to form, transmit, or decipher as they move through the problems of their lives is not to fall into uncertainty or "mixed messages." It is not even to abandon the idea of widely shared human interests and needs, for it is precisely what blocks communication that makes communication a necessary feature of human life. It is to say however that we must take the place "where we stand" (his phrase) as the place to start to yield whatever generalizations might be meaningful, that is actionable, in a given relationship.

"Americans have never recognized themselves," he wrote towards the conclusion of *In the American Grain*. "How can they? It is impossible until someone invent the original terms. As long as we are content to be called by somebody else's terms, we are incapable of being anything but our own dupes."

If the goal of exchange is to become more capable of dealing with the always difficult

challenges of life, then we don't need a border *literature* or a border *art* to be monumentalized, admired, and studied. We need border writing, border performances, that might start with the exchanges occurring when people do what they have to do—much like what ERRE did with *Toy an Horse*, or what Tamayo and Martínez have done in their responses to the dilemmas of local community. Williams's vision was utopian. He rejected the reality of hierarchy to savor the possibility of open-ended connection. But how can exchange occur when people don't share the same language? Williams's answer to that was, don't worry, *none* of the languages available to Americans as Americans are their own or ever will fully be. The basic tools human beings have for sharing are inadequate and always have been, but somehow people still manage to share much of the time.

The art work, whether it is an object, a novel or poem, an essay or a performance, is a special kind of sharing that presents a proposition about how to put aspects of the world in relation with each other. Individual responses are experiments into the “as if” conditions posited in an aesthetic work to determine if the work has provided them a form of self-knowledge that they can use. The success of an artist presupposes that the work has provided a way of thinking about the self in its world that has proven meaningful to others—even though they do not usually have the kind of direct communication of two people face to face.

Art has provided a place for audiences to experience what it *might* mean to live in a world with less restrictive boundaries. In the still imaginary postborder future, the citizenship of artists would become secondary to their participation in organizations dedicated primarily to creating a common cultural life transcending national borders. The claims of modern and contemporary art practice point strongly to that goal, and have for *generations*, but the

organizational framework is still largely fragmentary and ad hoc. For the time being the practices of artists and the imaginative revisionings they provide are still deeply embedded in national contexts or they remain invisible. What has given the work of both Daniel Joseph Martínez and Ramón Tamayo its particular power has been the ways in which each has brought to the surface fundamental assumptions governing personal identity and collective priorities of their respective nations. The same might be said of William Carlos Williams, though the power of the nation state is such that he has been encased in the structure of American literature he despised.

The visions artists bring today of postborder worlds are likely to fade before the rechanneling of habit effected through infrastructural investment, business contracts, international treaties, and changes in laws made by national congresses and state legislatures of both nations—a rechanneling that may likely simultaneously transform the education of and support for artists, the distribution of their work, as well as the critical questions that will occupy artists in a future where national borders have become largely administrative boundaries connecting communities with many types of organized shared interests. For the moment, artists provide a way of responding critically to human needs and desires increasingly criss-crossing a border that emerged in order to impede interaction.