

IMPROVISED CONTINENT

Pan-Americanism and Cultural Exchange

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Ya que no hablamos para ser escuchados
Sino para que los demás hablen
—Nicanor Parra

Now that we do not speak solely to be heard
But so that others may speak
—translation by William Carlos Williams

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Introduction

In March 1945, Brazilian novelist Érico Veríssimo stopped in Abilene, Texas, as part of a three-week tour of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Kentucky, where he spoke at nineteen locations about the place of pan-American unity in the global fight against fascism and militarism.¹ Abilene was then a medium-sized town of fifty thousand in the middle of the cattle and petroleum country of northwest Texas. Some six hundred people showed up for an afternoon's activities at Abilene Christian College. The meeting ground was decorated with U.S. and Brazilian flags, as well as cowboy gear from Texas and Brazil. After singing the "Star Spangled Banner," the audience was led in singing the Brazilian national anthem in English translation. A program of North American and Brazilian folk songs followed. Once again the audience sang along with translated lyrics projected onto a screen. Two songs were performed in Portuguese, so the audience could hear how they sounded in the original language.

After the cultural program, Érico Veríssimo presented a fifty-minute talk with slides entitled "Brazil, the Gentle Giant."² Veríssimo's talks were humorous, but he also used the opportunity and the goodwill he seemed to generate from his listeners to present them with his friendly criticisms of the United States. He insisted on talking about the country's long history of racial hatred and the damage that segregation laws did to the quality of human relationships within the United States. He confessed that he always had trouble filling out official forms in North America that required him to check the appropriate box for his race. He told his U.S. audiences, "In a melting pot like Brazil (and let it be said in passing, the same is true for the United States), none of us know for sure the lines of blood running in our veins." He decided to respond to such questions by writing in the only reply that he could say with certainty: "I am a human being."³ He compared the situation in the United States with his own country's legacy of racial mingling, though he frankly admitted, unlike official representatives of his government, that Brazil needed to do much more to assure that all citizens enjoyed full equality. He also talked about misinformation in the U.S. media about Latin America, using examples of recent portrayals of Brazil in movies and the press. He hoped that communication between the two countries, such as represented by the day's event, would increase, and

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Americans would quickly become as familiar with Brazil as they were with England or France.

At the end of his talk he received a thundering ovation from the crowd. The event concluded with a buffet of “typical Brazilian food” (menu not identified, but *churrascaria*, Brazilian barbecue typical of the southern region that was Veríssimo’s home, would have been comfortably similar to Texas barbecue), and a chance for conversation with the speaker. The president of the college rushed up to him after the talk with an invitation to spend a year in Abilene as a visiting professor. It was a proposal that other academic hosts across the United States often made him after his appearances. The success of Veríssimo’s first English-language publication, the novel *Crossroads*, had made him the most widely read Latin American writer in the United States, a position he maintained for the next two decades as eight more books appeared to critical and commercial success. Like many other writers and artists from Latin America, he had accepted a proposal from the U.S. State Department that he live in the United States “for the duration” and contribute to the wartime alliance by giving average U.S. citizens a sense of personal connection with Brazil, a country about which most knew very little.

Veríssimo’s talks were part of a massive program the federal government sponsored through the course of the war utilizing speakers and media to introduce U.S. citizens to the many countries in the United Nations alliance. Latin Americans were, by far, the most frequently employed allied speakers because, for the previous thirty years, private organizations in the United States had already been promoting closer cultural interaction between the United States and the twenty other countries in the Pan American Union. The first formal cultural exchange programs between the United States and Latin American countries were launched in 1912 with pilot funding from the Carnegie Corporation, and then significantly expanded in 1916. Other philanthropies joined in, as did educational institutions, museums, libraries, and commercial publishing and media companies, plus of course the government, for which both pan-Americanism and cultural exchange had important roles to play in the country’s broadest foreign policy objectives. An extensive network of personal and institutional relations took shape before World War II that allowed a select group of Latin American writers and artists to enter U.S. cultural markets and speak directly to the U.S. public.⁴ For a few, like Érico Veríssimo or the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, participation in U.S. cultural life was a critical turning point in their careers. For most, the connection was secondary or momentary. Some, like the Mexican painter Diego Rivera or Colombian historian and essayist Germán Arciniegas, embraced the goal of pan-American unity with enthusiasm, tempered with reasonable skepticism about how committed U.S. leaders were to interna-

tional equality. Others, like Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros or Brazilian historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, wondered how a country as deeply racist as the United States could have become the leader of a global alliance fighting to end racism. Many more were like Argentinean writer María Rosa Oliver, who thought that the United States, like most places, was a mix of things positive and negative. The international responsibilities the United States had assumed made it imperative that any writer or artist who could address the U.S. public take advantage of the opportunities pan-Americanism offered. The writers and artists featured in this book were a diverse group, whose differences and disagreements were more important than the commonality they shared within the United States as representatives of a region. Even so, they understood that their ability to speak directly to people in the United States was a privilege that came with obligations to help whoever encountered their work see inter-American, and ultimately global, relations from the perspective of an intellectual from another country. What they had to say was often critical, but like Érico Veríssimo's public appearances, generally aimed to help people in the United States become better global citizens.

This would never be an easy task, given that both pan-Americanism and cultural exchange rested on an unstable synthesis of utopian ideals and the rise of the United States as a world power. The Pan American Union, founded in 1890, was the first institutional expression of a new vision of global organization that the United States vigorously promoted throughout the twentieth century. For the next seventy-five years, pan-Americanism provided U.S. leaders with a test case for developing an international system consonant with their country's distinctive institutions.⁵ However much driven by considerations inside the United States of how to expand the nation's international power and influence, pan-Americanism as a policy linking twenty-one sovereign nations could not have endured if it had not expressed an idealistic, in many ways utopian vision of nations, big and small, rich and poor, equally submitting to a formal system of international law that resolved disputes through fair and disinterested procedures.⁶ In particular, pan-Americanism drew upon preexisting liberal ideas that the American nations had a special place in history as the home of liberty.⁷

The union appealed to many across the western hemisphere because it addressed widespread hopes that international relations could be reformed around enforceable principles of equality, mutuality, and community. Given the discrepancy in resources and wealth, none of the other twenty republics in the Pan American Union could enjoy anything more than formal equality. Whenever joint action occurred, somebody from the United States organized it and provided money, at times the government, very frequently philanthropies and

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other private institutions. Equality often felt in practice very much like genteel servitude. A resistant understanding of pan-Americanism was ready at hand: it was the Trojan horse by which the United States delegated the administration of its empire to dependent but notionally sovereign governments. Private citizens involved in pan-American activities were being seduced into taking for granted that U.S. ways of doing things were always the best. Pan-Americanism invoked, and continues to invoke for many, a project for world domination that began with a campaign to absorb Latin America into a U.S. empire without borders. The noted Argentinean historian Tulio Halperín Donghi stressed that a distinctive feature of U.S. dominance was reliance on cultural conversion, with the assumptions of the more powerful partner presumed to reflect a “natural law” that the weaker had to respect, even if they did not particularly like the consequences for their countries. Integration required implementing the logic of the U.S. approach to business, politics, and culture, which forced the elites of client states to operate more like their counterparts to the north did. Even when disagreements arose, rupture was unthinkable, which tended to make ruptures that did occur particularly violent.⁸ Halperín Donghi’s astute analysis of the contradiction underlying the multilateral international organizations that the United States preferred during the twentieth century explains why in fact resistance was very thinkable and acted on continuously, a major factor in the continuing international instability that has marked the U.S. rise to global leadership.

If the confusion of power and ideals has been a defining feature of the U.S. relationship with other countries, activities where the two have been most inseparable offer particularly important entry points. As part of a formal commitment to reimagining international relations on republican and democratic principles, the American nations pledged to increase cultural interaction and promote a new pan-American identity that in an ideal world could transform state-to-state relations. Regularized citizen-to-citizen contacts, including increased exchange of intellectual and cultural work, would lead to the citizens of American nations forming a shared public opinion monitoring and guiding their governments’ foreign policy choices as effectively as opinion within each nation shaped domestic politics. Programs organized under the rubric of “cultural exchange” had the formal charge of exposing citizens of other countries to U.S. writers, artists, and composers, while introducing foreign creative figures to the citizens of the United States. Interpretations of what these two broad goals meant shifted dramatically across the period covered in the book as the international situation and domestic politics within the United States changed.

“Cultural exchange,” no less than pan-Americanism, invokes equally contradictory abstractions. Culture that has become an instrument of official

policy cannot, by definition, offer critical frameworks for experiencing the complexities of the world in new, possibly uncomfortable ways. Even if the form appears innovative, as say with abstract expressionistic painting that the State Department exhibited abroad in the early years of the Cold War, the work is reduced to a form of propaganda, intended to extract conformist consent to policies serving the interests of those in power.⁹ Participating artists, however, many enthusiastic to contribute to the cause of global understanding, brought their own concerns and causes to the program. They offered foreign publics messages about life in the United States that went far beyond what diplomatic patrons wanted. One of the most compelling examples of how difficult it has been for official cultural exchange programs to control the contributions of participating artists can be found in Penny Von Eschen's landmark study of African American jazz musicians whom the State Department recruited as cultural ambassadors during the Cold War. Forced to confront the absurdity of their touring the world as representatives of American freedom when they were second-class citizens at home, many of the musicians Von Eschen studied became more vocal activists for civil rights and black liberation.¹⁰ The State Department often found that the political independence of U.S. artists, writers, musicians, and performers it drafted into foreign tours embroiled it in domestic political disputes. Anti-New Deal conservatives, in alliance with southern Democrats anxious to limit criticism of racial segregation from any source, foreign as well as domestic, argued that cultural exchange programs invited international public opinion to interfere in the internal affairs of the United States. However, even if domestic politics made many international programs unstable, cultural exchange staff had learned that outspoken cultural figures generated positive results overseas. Foreign audiences liked what they heard, and criticisms of the United States from U.S. artists on tour effectively countered widespread claims on the left and the right that the world's wealthiest power was materialist, machine driven, and conformist. Jazz musicians, as well as beat poets, rock musicians, and method actors, reinforced the image of the United States as a place where many social and cultural movements challenged entrenched custom and authority.¹¹

"Exchange" is a word that logically implies two-way interaction. In principle, the impact of cultural exchange programs within the United States should be a topic of importance, but previous studies have primarily focused on how the U.S. government deployed cultural programs to influence public opinion in other countries.¹² As the evidence presented in this book suggests, the story within the United States may even be of paramount importance. How does a society in the process of becoming a world power prepare its citizens for the responsibilities and often-exorbitant costs of global leadership? Can they develop a sense of connection with the citizens of other countries independent from the

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strategic considerations guiding their government's foreign policy? Do they have the insight they need to ensure that government foreign actions are accountable to democratic oversight?

The mixture of ideals and the exercise of power made both pan-Americanism and cultural exchange “fields of opportunities,” to borrow German historian Reinhart Koselleck’s term, that attracted social democrats and liberals who saw possibilities for realizing their ideals. Koselleck noted that beckoning utopias and the dystopias they simultaneously invoke provide crucial evidence of “hope and memory” shaping the forms and possibilities of action. Koselleck added that hope and memory, or in more abstract and generalized language expectation and experience, “simultaneously constitute history and its cognition,” that is, what people did and then the debates that follow over how to interpret those actions, their sources, and their consequences.¹³ Both pan-Americanism and cultural exchange expressed an effort across the twentieth century to reconcile profound change with liberal, democratic ideals. Peoples thrown together in a tragic history of invasion, genocide, and slavery promised to work together to achieve a peaceful, stable, and prosperous future. As a result, pan-Americanism can still be an object for nostalgia, surprisingly to a greater extent outside the United States than within. It recalls a past when the power of the United States appeared as if it would be used for the common good of all peoples. There was as well a hope that a regard for opinion in other countries might keep a tendency toward unilateral action in check. During that brief moment, ideals associated with the United States could be and often were emblematic of popular aspirations internationally even though they were inseparable from the growth of U.S. national power.

If pan-Americanism was the trial run for a specifically U.S. vision of global governance, it is equally true that liberal ideas had deep roots in the Latin American struggle for independence, roots that explain the generally positive response given to U.S. proposals for greater hemispheric cooperation. When in the first decades of the twentieth century, the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó, the Dominican Pedro Henríquez Ureña, the Brazilian Oswald de Andrade, the Chilean Gabriela Mistral, or the Mexican Carlos Pellicer each spoke of an “American ideal,” they invoked images of opportunity, openness to change, personal freedom, individuality, and self-governance that many U.S. citizens may think of as uniquely belonging to their own country. The Americanism of these and other writers proclaiming America’s mission in the world did not derive from U.S. ideas or U.S. practices. Indeed each of these figures wrote of the United States as a threat to the “American ideal,” even if on other occasions, they also wrote of the United States as a caretaker of humanity’s hopes. What U.S. journalists and historians have often described as nationalist resistance to imperi-

alism might in other countries be viewed as a defense of “universal” values that people in the United States have not understood deeply enough and have often betrayed.¹⁴

Consistent with Koselleck’s model, pan-Americanism acted as a “horizon of expectation,” within which hopes and fears jostled as Americans from many nations tried to envision what the future would bring their peoples. Expressions of expectation take shape within the practical “spaces of experience” that develop within societies over time. For writers, artists, filmmakers, and their patrons, those spaces were not determined by geopolitics, nor even by national politics. Political goals helped establish an expectation of a future community of nations, while providing resources for promoting cultural interaction between the United States and other American nations. The people who had to do the work, however, followed their personal interests and the requirements of the institutions that made it possible for them to reach a public.¹⁵ The practical conditions shaping what any cultural worker can say or do are a central part of the story that follows, for they clarify the restraints, both external and internal, shaping the production and distribution of cultural work.¹⁶ Writing and art are meaningful when they can be scheduled into the practices that institutions foster to assure the continuity of their activities. The everyday practices of book publishing, of organizing exhibits and tours, or of releasing subtitled or dubbed films involve thousands of discrete activities requiring an experienced support staff. The availability of material presupposes volume, routines, and schedules that are comfortable for the people who must do the work. Satisfying the demands of organizational routine is a minimal requirement for any given work creating or finding its public. The practical disjunctions between how different countries organized the production and distribution of culture continuously proved to be among the most difficult obstacles to broadening cultural exchange. One of the key conclusions I have drawn in the course of this study is that practical “necessities” (which might better be thought of as organized routines that create a set of habits for everybody involved, including creative personnel) often lead to significant ideological results, which, however, cannot be understood, much less explained, by recourse to the ideological predispositions of the people involved.¹⁷ By insisting that ideology is only one element in any given historically situated practice, we can escape the teleologies inherent to polemics and clarify the fractures that accompany any ostensibly utopian project without being trapped inside the emotionally intense political debates of the past.

Despite the importance given to practical matters, the narrative that follows does not utilize the methods of sociology of culture. Instead, the book presents a series of exemplary characters who took on the role of cultural ambassador,

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many (though not all) operating from a conviction that if citizens of different countries better understood each other, they would act to limit the evil their governments do. Érico Veríssimo has a particularly important role in the story of pan-American cultural exchange. The State Department brought him to the United States in 1941 because cultural affairs staff believed that he had a special talent for communication across cultures. They introduced him to publishers and provided funds for the translation of his first book. Their hunch that he could reach the reading public in the United States proved correct. After nearly three decades of cultural exchange efforts to promote interest within the United States in Latin American writers, Veríssimo was the first to enjoy both critical and commercial success in the United States, with nine titles published between 1943 and 1967. During this time, his only peer in the United States was the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, whose work early gained a stellar position in the smaller but intensely committed poetry market. Today, Veríssimo is unknown in the United States to anyone who is not a specialist in Brazilian literature, though in the Portuguese-language world, he is considered among the most important novelists of the modern era. Veríssimo's personal trajectory made him an exemplary figure for this study. In the 1940s, he was an enthusiastic and popular spokesperson for the Good Neighbor Policy; during the Cold War, he was staunchly anticommunist and worked as director of cultural affairs for the Pan American Union in the mid-1950s; by the 1960s, he had turned critical of U.S. militarism and the propensity of the nation's leaders to respond to political problems with military solutions. In 1967 he published a novel whose central characters were U.S. soldiers fighting in Vietnam, a book that was not, and has not yet been, translated into English. His next and last novel, published in 1971, also never published in an English-language version, addressed the use of torture as an instrument of policy in Brazil. Veríssimo analyzed the social conflicts in the country that culminated in the military seizing control of Brazil in 1964 with the support and blessing of the U.S. government. That Veríssimo was once well known in the United States but has been forgotten raises a historical puzzle central to understanding how and why publishers, critics, and readers in the United States selected the foreign writers they absorbed into their own culture. For the writers and artists discussed in this book, a passionate effort to make a difference and leave the world a better place for the next generation is the heart of each story. The bodies of work produced vary in quality and effectiveness, reflecting the limitations of the creator's imagination and skill as well as the ideological and practical restrictions he or she faced on what could be said. The lives glimpsed inevitably were tragic as hopes collided with the fissures deeply rooted in the times and places in which they operated. Nonetheless, moving across borders often proved liberating because for a brief period rou-

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tines were broken and new ways of understanding the world emerged in work that traveling made possible.¹⁸

The contradictions inherent to the emergence of pan-Americanism exemplify the political definition of community formation that Hannah Arendt developed in *The Human Condition*.¹⁹ “Community” suggests ideas of sharing and cooperation, but Arendt offered her readers a darker vision, stripped of the illusions that ideals provide but more consistent with the historical lessons to be found in the experiences of people living and acting together. Arendt contended that political community forms primarily through the contention of different groups and individuals vying to recreate the world around one’s “sovereign mastery.” A clear example of what she meant can be found in U.S. secretary of state Richard Olney’s declaration to the British government in 1895 that no other power was in a position to challenge U.S. interests in the western hemisphere. In fact, Olney presented an expectation as already accomplished fact. A determination to make the wish reality quickened the efforts of successive U.S. administrations to convince and coerce others into an international community based on U.S. ideas of a well-run society. But even if U.S. leaders assumed their own values were universal, they operated within a highly partisan, competitive political world. As practical politicians, they knew that communities do not grow from “shared values” but from an often reluctantly embraced necessity to understand what opponents are trying to say and then search for a way to reconcile disagreements—with weaker parties having to decide the balance of adaptation and resistance most realistic for the given situation. The goal of communication in a situation of potential violence is not the promotion of “good will,” but to put opposing parties into a relationship that requires both to change as a result of interaction. Communication always raises fundamental existential issues. In the process of trying to decode and interpret what an opponent demands, an inward process that opens as recognition of differences leads to questions central to self-understanding: who am I, what do I want, how should I act now, how might *we* act if we were to act in concert, what conditions allow groups that historically encountered each other as opponents to become a “we”?

Arendt, in her discussion of the political, conflict-based nature of community, proposed a model for understanding the critical role that cultural work can play. The results of actions are often unpredictable, Arendt noted, and in many situations losses are irreversible, particularly once opponents turn to violence to achieve their goals in preference to dialogue. Cultural work, perhaps particularly fictional work or the visual arts because they present worlds of “as if,” offers a domain where issues can be addressed with relative safety because the ideas and feelings to be exchanged and examined do not require public action of any sort. Nothing is asked of the recipient beyond reflection on what one has

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seen. Writing, art, and other cultural products can play an important role in community-formation processes because solitude, Arendt insisted, is necessary for communication to be digested. Communication must include moments when retreat into one's own interiority is an appropriate response, a situation that corresponds well with the anonymity of twentieth-century mass media. But even if reading a novel, viewing a film, or walking through an art exhibit provide relatively safe spaces for absorbing different points of view, the process remains uncomfortable, even if not directly threatening. For there to be an exchange that can be called communication, change must remain a possible outcome. Pondering what they have seen or heard, recipients evaluate the differences revealed and what they require. A successful communication makes recipients vulnerable, potentially aware of their own failings (typical absences in perspectives) and of their own failures (specific acts). In the process of self-recognition growing from communication across differences comes an availability to change. Whether the end result is some form of cooperation or more sharply defined hostility, repertoires of identity and collectivity are thrown into play. This was the possibility that motivated the men and women whose hopes constitute the narrative of this book.²⁰

Diego Rivera in 1943 wrote an article for a Mexican journal in which he explained why he remained convinced that pan-Americanism would eventually overcome national chauvinism and convince the people of the United States to enter into a fuller political community with the citizens of other American countries. The logic of their own national ideals projected into hemispheric and, as a result of the war with Germany and Japan, global arenas would lead U.S. citizens to abide by the will of the world's majority if decisions emerged from free, open debate, rather than the dictates of corrupt leaders. Rivera was not so naïve as to believe that the time had arrived for equality between citizens of rich countries and those of much poorer countries. Mexicans still needed to be vigilant in protecting their interests. One of the best ways to do that, however, was to leap across the border and engage people in the United States, as he had done with great success. He took a leap of faith, typical of many who found the opportunities that pan-Americanism provided them mysteriously exciting. Rivera argued that pan-Americanism made U.S. society more available to the logic of international engagement, but only to the degree that it was connected to an international movement to expand democratic participation in governance. The desire to prevent another war potentially more horrifying than World War II might push the citizens of rich countries like the United States to broaden their understanding of fellowship. As long as pan-Americanism remained limited to negotiating over trade and security issues, the countries would be trapped in what made them most unequal. Equality would emerge only to the degree that

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developing a shared imagination had priority, and toward that aspiration, not surprisingly Rivera thought that creative workers such as he had an indispensable role. To explore the foundations and the possibilities of Rivera's expectation, let us turn now to the beginning of the twentieth century as efforts to create a new pan-American culture got under way.