theories and methodologies

Communing with the Past

RAÚL CORONADO

I SPENT MUGGY CHICAGO SUMMERS INDOORS, TAPPING AT MY KEYBOARD, CHURNING OUT PAGES OF MY BOOK MANUSCRIPT, FOLLOWING the paths of people's lives, obsessing over the right turn of phrase. When I grew lonely (which I always inevitably did), I'd head out to the Starbucks on Wilson and Magnolia, comforting myself with the sounds of people around me. I wrote better late at night, when night had descended and lulled everyone to sleep. I felt then a great sense of relief, tranquility, buoyed by nothing else but the swirl of ideas, because everyone around me in my world had settled down for the night. It was then that I was not distracted by the world of the living. Summer in Chicago, after all, was an exuberantly social season. The city exploded with life; throngs of runners would peel their shirts off in the humid heat as they sprinted along Lakefront Trail. But for me, invitations to barbecues, beach parties, and weekend getaways to Saugatuck were left unanswered: I had my book to write.

Writing is an incredibly lonely process, and yet the act of placing word next to word, building narrative and argument to seduce the reader, produces in me profoundly powerful, almost spiritual moments of fullness.[1] In those moments when I was all alone, having spent hours indoors, whether summer or winter, the chastened lover or friend chased away, at times—many times—when I was able to string words together in a beautiful balancing act of symmetry, I would experience some of my most joyous, illuminating moments of insight and intimate connection with the world around me.

I use the blatantly autobiographical "I" because in many ways my former colleague, Eric Slauter, is right in recognizing that "the origins of [my] project are deep and personal."[2] I'd like to make that observation more explicit, not to dwell on the self but to flesh out the unabashedly humanistic aspects of my work that connect the personal to the social, the immanent to the transcendent, to examine those fleeting moments of fullness. After all, as Eric's and my former adviser once noted, "Every dissertation is an autobiography." And so, too, every book.

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I explain at the end of my book's acknowledgments how being with my family and loved ones brought to life the ideas I had lingered over, spending innumerable hours dissecting connotations, tracing etymologies, unweaving centuries of meaning making as these things had crisscrossed texts. Writing the book was my attempt to understand from a variety of perspectives—historical, social, political, but ultimately existential, metaphysical, and spiritual—differences I had felt as a child traveling back and forth between Oak Cliff, the Mexican neighborhood in which I was raised in Dallas, and my dad's ranch on the outskirts of the small northern Mexican city of Matehuala.

Everything about Mexico I loved. As the sun would set and the family gathered in the kitchen, huddled around a kerosene lamp, I would relish the company of adults—my aunts, uncles, grandparents, parents—along with my sisters and cousins. The mixture of the finely powdered dry desert dirt, the smell of the day's heat ceding to the damp coolness of the night, and the charcoaled remains of mesquite filled the adobe kitchen. The lack of electricity forced us kids to play under the moonlight at night, the world brilliantly coming to life in shades of violet and gray. In the *rancho* I could escape with my sisters and cousins to the *milpa*, spend hours pretending to shepherd the *chivas*, surrounded by nothing but the sound of doves and baying of animals in the distance. In Mexico, there was nothing to distract us from the unfolding present: no television, no toys, no books. Our lives were structured by nature, punctuated by the mysterious, fantastic, religious ceremonies of the *posada* at Christmas, the annual celebration of someone's birth, or the disheartening death of a relative.

Returning to Dallas was always a deeply melancholic occasion. We'd leave at dawn in order to make the fourteen-hour drive back before nightfall. The two-lane dilapidated highways in Mexico competed with nature, as panoramas of sprawling arid fields, valleys, and mountains threatened to snuff out the roads. Once in Texas, the mountains and cacti yielded to mesquite-filled plains. The pothole-filled highways in Mexico, whose edges disintegrated and merged with the engulfing desert, gave way to meticulously maintained, smooth freeways, measured perfectly by utility poles.

In Dallas, my childhood was measured by the rhythms of school, first at the primarily Mexican and African American James Bowie Elementary School. It was there that I was tracked into the honors program. It was at Bowie that I first encountered my first queer role model. Mr. McDougal was an inspiring teacher. It was also at that school that I first experienced the shocking cognitive dissonance of what I can now describe in hindsight as racism. Learning that I had applied to the citywide honors magnet junior high school, Mr. McDougal expressed dismay and told me, more in a sharp admonition than as a reminder, that it would be very difficult for me. The seed of doubt began to germinate. The magnet school offered me a superb education, exposing me to worlds I had never known, possibilities I had never imagined, and rude awakenings that would haunt me for the rest of my life.

Out of a class of ninety, I was one of two Mexican Americans and among the poorest. I learned then that I was poor. That I was different and not like the other students was emblazoned across my skin, carved into my being. By the time I finished high school, the lessons of Texas-style racism had permanently lodged my "excuse me tongue" mentality, "my stumbling mind, . . . this / nagging preoccupation / with the feeling of not being good / enough," as Lorna Dee Cervantes painfully writes in her poem (5). High school English teachers, notwithstanding the A's I had received the year before, forced my mother to sign waivers, absolving themselves of responsibility if I failed the honors English courses in which she and I had demanded they allow me to

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enroll. (No wonder I was the only person in my AP English course to opt out of taking the exam. And no wonder I would later become a professor of English.) On graduating, I fled to the University of Texas, Austin, to escape the dehumanizing racist, homophobic world of suburban Dallas.

The early 1990s witnessed the culmination of the culture wars, manifested at UT with the election of the first black lesbian feminist as student body president. My English high school teachers and the antimulticultural forces at UT may have insisted that we "*lack[ed] imagination*." But Cherríe Moraga was right. "*No.* I lack[ed] language." At UT, the promulticultural forces offered me a "language to clarify / my resistance to the literate" (Moraga 54–55). Sandra Cisneros's voice rang so intimately familiar; David Montejano's history traced my mother's childhood farmworker itineraries. At UT, I learned that the personal had always been political. I came to thrive in the world of queer, feminist Chicana/o student activism, meeting Louis Mendoza, an English graduate student who, when I asked him what on earth one did with a PhD, told me that one spent one's life reading, teaching, and writing. A new world had spilled open for me.

In graduate school I forced myself to develop well-thought-out arguments as to why nineteenth-century Chicana/o literary history mattered. Yet in the Stanford world of high culture, not even the one-minute version of my argument would attract enough attention from most professors: they absolved themselves of curiosity, relegating my project to the foreign world of "ethnic studies," something that had nothing to do with them or the universality they and their ideas embodied. It was not until I received a Fulbright to write my dissertation in Mexico City that I finally arrived at a completely different understanding of myself and my place in the world. There, in that spectacular metropolis, completely unlike the rural Mexico I had known as a child, I began to transform. At UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), I described my research interests, prepared to cut myself off after the one-minute version was done, only to find there was genuine interest in my project. Even more personal and profound was that my racialized sense of self began to fracture.

The Fulbright afforded me access to a solidly middle-class lifestyle. I was comparatively fair-skinned, living the life of the mind, writing solitarily throughout the day, escaping in the evenings to cultural events and the queer nightlife. I was no longer a working-class Mexican American kid; I had become (more of) a universal subject, part of the dominant world of privilege. I returned to Stanford and the United States with a newly minted sense of entitlement, a new perspective on what it meant to belong to the Americas, to be of Mexican origin, to be born and raised in the United States, and to not allow others' provincial, backward ideas to restrict my aspirations.

More than ever, I felt the contingencies of race. In the United States, biology had been destiny; in Mexico, everything became topsy-turvy. In the United States, the paranoia of racism had tripped me up; in Mexico, I came to relish the vibrant intellectual life of the Americas. Yet, the inequities that percolated around me in Mexico now reminded me of my previous life. It was an ironic world, in which Chicanas/os had not always been victims, in which they too had inherited vexed, complicated legacies.

I wanted to wipe the slate clean. Rather than begin with the moment of conquest and colonization (and consequently with resistance), that is, rather than begin with the aftermath of the United States–Mexico War, I wanted to understand nineteenth-century Spanish Americans, who became only ostensibly Mexican after independence in 1821 and who would become American after 1846; I wanted to understand them from their point of view, on their own terms, and understand

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the world they wanted to bring into being before the master narrative of United States–style colonization warped and erased those dreams.

My search for the past, this desire to string events into a historical narrative that has closure and offers analysis or a "moralizing" conclusion is, as Hayden White has insistently reminded us, a search for authoritative meaning, for a "fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience" (21). This fullness was not unrelated to the equanimity I intuitively felt as a child in Mexico.

But that goal was always elusive. As I began writing my dissertation, my voice floundered in a sea of authority, losing purpose and direction—that is, until I took a writing course with Moraga, who urged her students to return to their own sources of pleasure and anguish, to put into words what was most true, and most elusive, for them.

Moraga had already theorized, in 1983, this process of coming to consciousness. "I lack language," she writes in her poem "It's the Poverty." "Words are a war to me. / They threaten my family. / To gain the word to describe the loss, / I risk losing everything" (54–55). The poem's narrator rejects her Anglo lover's suggestion to give up her well-worn typewriter ribbon in favor of a new one. But the narrator refuses to discard the ribbon, realizing that doing so would lead her to abandon the linguistic-cultural history from which she emerges. In effect, the ribbon serves as a symbol for the historically complex, if completely devalued, lives of Mexican Americans.

For Moraga, the greatest risk in meaning making is using an epistemological framework divorced from her culture's history, yielding "a monster, / the word's length and body / swelling up colorful and thrilling / looming over my *mother*, characterized. / Her voice in the distance / *unintelligible illiterate*" (55). The task, the poem suggests, is to remain with what is present, to dive deep into the specificity of her and her culture's experiences, to not force theories onto her analysis of who she is.

The 1980s witnessed a wave of queer Chicana/o public intellectuals reflecting on the process of writing and coming to consciousness. Along with Moraga, Richard Rodriguez and Gloria Anzaldúa plumbed the depths of subject formation, highlighting the ways language produced their understanding of themselves. Their words offered me succor, especially as Moraga, Rodriguez, and Anzaldúa fleshed out the painful, productive processes of emerging from working-class Mexican communities, yearning to understand themselves, their worlds, and who they could become.

Rodriguez in particular describes this process as a shift from experiencing fullness in the intimacy of his working-class Mexican American family to the sense of communion he feels through the sublime, solitary act of writing for a public. The poignant aural opening of *Hunger of Memory* conjures up the sonorous life of interstitial beingness where the sounds of Spanglish spoken at home produced comforting, lulling states of intimate transcendence:

> Some nights, no one seemed willing to loosen the hold sounds had on us. . . . [W]e happily sounded that military drum roll, the twirling roar of the Spanish *r*. Family language: my family's sounds. The voices of my parents and sisters and brother. Their voices insisting: *You belong here. We are family members. Related. Special to one another. Listen!* (17)

Rodriguez also felt this sense of intimacy and belonging in the Latin mass, where inner beauty was cultivated in a sea of communion: "[T]he sounds of Latin would sometimes blur my attention to induce an aimless drift inward. But then I would be called back by the priest's voice . . . to public prayer, the reminder that an individual has the aid of the Church in his life" (105). The intricate weaving of beauty and intimacy, of transcendence and immanence, of Communion and the buffered self (to borrow Taylor's term [*Secular Age* 27–41]) crystalized during Rodriguez's working-class Mexican-American Catholic childhood. Hear-

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ing and experiencing the sounds and rituals of Catholic mass with his family produced "impossible riches. I remember wanting to cry out with joy, to shout." And then, after mass, outside church, his mother would simply say, "'It was very nice today. . . . It makes you feel good, the beautiful music and everything.' That was all that she said. It was enough" (107).

Hunger of Memory elegantly paints this picture of collective fullness only to mourn its passing. Like Rodriguez, I have romanticized my childhood memories of intimacy. But he goes a step further: self-consciously using the pastoral mode to narrate his childhood memories allows him to both idealize and eulogize them as idyllic experiences that were pregnant with meaning but, because he sees assimilation as irreversible, are experiences that must be abandoned.

Rodriguez, however, is on to something. If the intimate, private experience of being (sounding) working-class Mexican American has receded for him, he has turned, in the solitary process of writing, to the solace that the public world of ideas brings him. A few years after *Hunger of Memory* was published, Anzaldúa confessed she too experienced that solitary, cathartic process: "I need to be alone, or in a sensory-deprived state" (92). Comparing the process of writing to a festering, embedded cactus needle, Anzaldúa has

> to do something to put an end to the aggravation and to figure out why I have it. I get down into the place where it's rooted in my skin and pluck away at it . . . , making it worse before it can get better. Then it comes out. That's what the writing process is for me, an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of the experience.

For her, writing "feels like I'm creating my own face, my own heart. . . . My soul makes itself through the creative act" (95). For Rodriguez, writing "heightens the feelings of privacy. They permit the most thorough and careful exploration." The solitary act of writing forces him to describe feelings and thoughts to another person. That is, "only because of that reader did the words come to the page. The reader became my excuse, my reason for writing" (203). One writes (I write) to sublimate this beingness onto this page, through these words. But in doing so, in "describ[ing] one's feelings, one can describe oneself to oneself. One names what was previously only darkly felt" (Rodriguez 203). We write into existence what we sense, feel, believe.

Before, Rodriguez did not need words (experience "was enough"). Before, one was surrounded and buoyed by the interstitial beingness of the intimate family. But now the personal loneliness of words written for a public audience has taken its place. Rodriguez's revelatory, if troubling, binary of private and public delineates the nuanced differences in experiencing fullness even as Rodriguez mourns the demise of familial intimacy in favor of the "deeply personal in public life" (200). His binary is given in the form of a coming-of-age narrative, as a story of inevitable change from one fullness to another, rather than as an analysis, much as Moraga and Anzaldúa offer, or theorization of multiple forms of experiencing fullness.

"Intimacy," Rodriguez tells us, "is not trapped within words. It passes through words. It passes" (40). For all three writers, language has the power to tap into and release the deep, vigorous sources of feeling, spirit, soul. Yet the syntax here is somewhat, albeit significantly, imprecise.

It is not so much that language taps into and releases but that it becomes the source from which fullness emerges.[3] We may believe that language helps us touch the soul, just as we think that it helps us reconstruct the past as it happened. We think of it as an objective, transparent tool to describe our inner lives, our social world, or what actually unfolded in the past. But language does not touch what seems outside itself; it is not a tool that merely describes the world (interior and

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exterior). Rather, it creates our sense of transcendence, of spirit, the universal. Yet to say that language produces our world is far from saying that our world is a plaything, radically contingent or relative. Our world is entangled in specific histories that are in turn enmeshed in larger webs of signification.[4]

This was the approach I took in my book. I wanted to historicize how communities have experienced what Jacques Derrida describes as a metaphysics of presence. Where most associate this concept with a relativist approach to thinking of the self and of knowledge, I take his patiently elaborated concept as a meticulous historical project that traces how philosophers have yearned to achieve this state of being, one obsessed with foundations and origins, as a concept that refers to our desire for logos, "of that which makes possible an absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self-knowledge" (98). The history of writing, of knowledge, is the history of grammatology, a search for the origin of meaning and beingness.

My book is a history not of literature, as Anna Brickhouse notes, but of textuality. Although I take and much appreciate Eric's point in claiming that "human beings rather than texts are the characters of [my] work"—that is, that I spent time developing a narrative voice in order "to tell a dramatic story" even while relying "so heavily on the close reading of texts"—I would say my book seeks to navigate the narrow interstitial space between human beings and the traces they have left behind.

What I am after is the history of how communities have sought to produce these moments of beauty, of transcendence (through communion), of immanence (through insightful, introspective reflection), of how the material effects of the consolidation of power and of domination congealed into voices of authority.[5] This sense of beauty and wonder, in our contemporary moment, is poignantly felt in the embodied self, but there are many ways, contemporary and historical, of experiencing this fullness.

A lesson I learned in writing my book is that the sense of presence is always already elusive. It emerges between inner reflection and outer communion. There is no stable source, no stable origin. The sense of presence or fullness is diffuse, appearing for a moment before waning. It passes. Like life—like our lives—it emerges, flourishes, and soon vanishes, giving way to new forms, new temporary experiences of equanimity, compassion, pleasure, pain, turmoil, and witnessing. These too, with time, will cede space to other passing moments of presence, of being. In our precariously solipsistic era of the self, the excruciating question to be learned from Derrida's history is whether we can make peace with this radical contingency.

Why history? Indeed, as Kirsten Silva Gruesz asks, why write intellectual history and not write more in the vein of speculative history? What we need, to echo her essay "Utopía Latina," is a philosophy of history (57, 59). More specifically, we need to know what function history fulfills. Why do we need one version of history (e.g., social or political) more than another (e.g., intellectual or speculative)? "What wish is enacted," asks White, "what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story" (4)?

This desire to fix meaning authoritatively, to access the real and turn it "into an object of desire," the ability to definitively point to evidence and claim that, say, in 1813 Texas declared itself independent for the first time as a republic, is one of the defining characteristics of historical narrative. White reminds us that it was Hegel who first conceptualized "historical self-consciousness, the kind of consciousness capable of imagining the need to represent reality as a history," as something that was fundamentally rooted in "law, legality, and legitimacy" (14). We may extend the argument and say that insofar as historical narrative is plotted along verifiable sources,

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the more securely will it serve as ontological authority, as the true story of who we are.

In writing my book, I sought to place emphasis not so much on events or people as on traces of presence that I perceived in a piece of writing. These traces were embedded in material and symbolic webs of meaning that inscribed and circumscribed the conditions of possibility that had produced the piece of writing. What was required, then, was a history of these conditions even as I sought to unpack the webs of meaning in the document. That is, I realized that I needed to produce a narrative history that could account for the production of documents in order to then delve into their complexity of meaning. It demanded a balancing act: I had to authoritatively fix meaning, narratively produce an origin (even as I placed that origin in scare quotes), on the one hand, and accept contingency, on the other.

Those moments when my book seeks to take a panoramic view of the events unfolding, especially to summarize fields unknown to specialists (the complex world of Late Scholasticism, the ways in which the French Protestant-Catholic conflict served Spanish America as a useful lesson on its path to modernity, or the consequences of literacy in the Protestant and Catholic worlds), have been criticized by some reviewers.[6] I do not completely disagree with their points of contention; I do sidestep rather complex, sometimes contradictory discourses in my perhaps too carefully bifurcated binaries, especially as they follow the lines of Catholic versus Protestant.

Ralph Bauer's suggestion that José Álvarez de Toledo's invoking of "Motesuma" in the 1811 broadside should be read as creole patriotism is wonderful but in no way contradicts my reading of the broadside as using Catholic political philosophy (Coronado 229–37). Tamar Herzog appears to misread my project as one that engages with metropolitan intellectuals from, say, Mexico City rather than those from the periphery of Spanish America. This misreading leads her to claim that the more informative approach to postcolonial Spanish Americans is not to posit a Catholic, communal Spanish America against a Protestant, individualistic Anglo America but to ask whether Spanish Americans considered the break between colonial rule and national independence an example of continuity or of rupture. It was certainly a question of continuity versus rupture for the metropoles of Spanish America but most certainly not for those who lived in the territory that would become the United States Southwest. Likewise, characterizing the postrevolutionary political culture of the United States as "herald[ing] continuity" with its British past is simply wrong.[7] Sandra Gustafson suggests that a comparative (as opposed to a contrastive) mode would have highlighted possible similarities in the political philosophical histories of Spanish America. As with Herzog, her suggestion might apply to the metropoles of the Americas but reaches its limit in the context of the materials I studied.

Insofar as my primary concern was historicizing textuality as it was produced or circulated in Texas, the larger epistemological contexts of religious difference manifested themselves in Texas in the way I narrated them. But overall I accept the justice of their critique: I should have been more cautious with religious binaries. Binaries or broad characterizations are useful in pushing thought in new directions. Although we need binaries to make sense of the world, the moment those categories of analysis become facile stereotypes, reducing rather than elucidating, they cease to aid understanding.

Whether my history is successful or not, we need to continue to write new histories with which we can cathect. If we are to reimagine our present in order to produce more utopic projects for the future, a future that most certainly will become ever more diverse, a future where in many places people of color are already in the majority, then we need to

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write more effective histories of the present. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot eloquently writes, we need histories that can simultaneously record the conflicting, melancholic accounts of conquest, slavery, and genocide and offer our public a means to imagine and ultimately redress "present injustices for which previous generations only set the foundations" (150).

How, in other words, should we alter the way we narrate the story of our imagined communities so as to inspire us to work toward more utopic futures?[8] Will histories continue to be written according to the template of the nation? Will yet more revisionist histories of the American Renaissance speak to our transforming present? We need, as Gyan Prakash has written, more postfoundational histories that insist on "mak[ing] cultural forms and even historical events contingent . . . [in order to] write those histories that history and historiography have excluded" (401). What will emerge then will be not redeeming subjects, not the origins of prelapsarian universes, but instead human subjects, full of contradictions, and new worlds as baffling to us as ours would be to them.

Reading the harrowing 1813 account of the captured Spanish-Texan revolutionary women at the hands of sadistic Spanish royal soldiers has expanded my horizons of what it means to be human, to be a witness, and to write with empathy, with a more capacious understanding of what it means to flourish (Coronado 417–33). I knew the "Memoria" dealt with the aftermath of the revolution, so in my effort to finish the writing quickly I waited to read the document until I wrote the bulk of the material on the revolution (213–48). But on reading the document, I was paralyzed. For days I could not write. I mourned. I shared the story with my sister and my mother, who listened to me in between sobs. (They, too, helped me produce the book, one of my sisters drawing the gorgeously illustrated maps and my mother helping me overcome writer's block when I could not figure out what to do with Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara's travel account. "Tell me why you think it's important," she told me over a birthday dinner in Oak Cliff. I went on to write four chapters about Gutiérrez de Lara.)

The process of close reading is, as I wrote in the conclusion, "at once aesthetic and spiritual. It is an act of recognizing another person's vision of his or her world, and the manner in which another has sought to achieve that most basic sense of transcendence" (393–94). Archival work, close reading, and writing narrative history can, at times, produce in me a transcendent sense of communing with the past, with those, like me, who sought to make meaning in and of their lives.

Yet the truth is that this process of writing does nothing for them. The women who were tortured, beaten, and raped and who wrote their account "so that the public may know the truth" (425) were quickly forgotten, passed over by historians who deemed their account insignificant and relegated it to the dustbin of history. The women have been long dead. The words I—we—write are not for them but for us, not about them but about us. Even if I imagine this communion with the past, the words I write serve to augment only our world today. But it is here that the sense of presence brightens with intensity, since the moment of the present—the desire to produce a more capacious, expansive world beyond the bodily experience of our solipsistic desires—is future-oriented. We write hoping that the future will feel as much compassion for us as we do for our forebears. We may thus imagine that someday someone will heed our words, desire to commune with us, with our desires and trepidations, and, in doing so, expand our cosmos, our sense of humanity.

Notes

1. In what follows, I draw on Taylor's elaboration of "fullness" (*Secular Age* 4–14).

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2. Behar's desire to critically weave her subjectivity into her scholarship has shaped my work (1–33).

3. Taylor recently elaborated this point in *The Language Animal*.

4. The elusive question of social-intellectual change, its causes and effects, is what leads Philip Lorenz to enquire into my use of the concept of "rupture" as a reference to the radical, epistemic break Spanish Americans experienced in their relation to writing. I would agree with Lorenz and insist that these ruptures are "the outcome of complex collective institutional and social processes."

5. For a moving, beautifully written account of how black communities in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean sought to produce a sense of belonging in the aftermath of the Haitian revolution, see Johnson.

6. See, respectively, Bauer; Herzog; and Gustafson (in this issue).

7. See, e.g., Jehlen (1–21), Fliegelman (174–267), and Elliott (369–400). It is unfortunate, and perhaps telling, that none of the *PMLA* reviewers of my book is a Latin Americanist.

8. For a compelling argument on the need to find new ways to narrate our past, see Scott; for the need to imagine utopias for our future, see Muñoz.

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