

EXPEDIENCY:
THE USES OF LATIN AMERICANISM
IN THE GLOBAL WAR ERA—A RESPONSE TO PATRICK DOVE

Samuel Steinberg

Some time ago, I was asked by the editors of *FORMA* to contribute a position paper on the recent history and future of the field of Latin American criticism and theory. I could not muster a response, and so, like so many scholarly commitments of recent years, I flaked out. Happily, or unhappily, Patrick Dove provided an essay that I wish I had written and which I have now been asked to respond to. I wish I had written it because it marks the conditions of malaise that led me to flake out on writing the piece I had been invited to write. I cite him here at length:

Latin American studies is in trouble today not due to polemics but because we no longer have a commonly held sense of what is at stake in the intellectual work we do. As a field, we have become content with merely replicating existing knowledge, applying theory to context, and defending intellectual territory. The problem I am describing is not specific to Latinamericanism. It is endemic to the humanities as a whole, and it has arisen in the context of the contemporary university, a space in which job stability for humanists has become precarious, in which support for research is practically nonexistent, and in which institutional power projects the message that intellectual inquiry only has merit insofar as it can be monetized. As a field, we respond to these pressures by fashioning ourselves as entrepreneurs of our academic selves.¹

At some risk of “replicating existing knowledge” I thought it might be interesting to look back to what seemed to me to be an early symptom of our lack of a shared project and of a most thoroughgoing monetization of “intellectual inquiry” and what might be called “cultural work” more generally.

First, however, I thought I should underline that *FORMA*'s original prompt emerges in a rather specific context for a whole “generation” of scholars—the cohort to which I belong, 10 years or so after Dove—which faced a

new set of challenges with respect to the production of their first post-tenure books (that is, their promotion books), perhaps most dramatically in the COVID-19 pandemic with its concomitant personal strains (psychological, familial, financial), along with effects more institutional (the final virtualization of university life, the further decimation of academic publishing). To be sure, in our field in particular, many scholars saw their productivity curtailed even before the COVID-19 pandemic with the emergence of the first Trump regime. Then (as now) many friends and colleagues feared to circulate as freely as they once did and, for example, eschewed travel to conferences, seminars, and symposia, or abandoned social media and other such “public” social, cultural, and intellectual forums. What I mean to suggest, in short, is that the last 25 years simultaneously condenses a century of horror, while at the same time it has not furnished the conditions for nearly two and a half decades of scholarly productivity. Practically speaking, for many this has meant deferring some of the intellectual and institutional privileges and responsibilities corresponding to promotion to Full Professor, while—in a more personal or private register—it has led to some real despondency regarding the work to which many of us have dedicated our lives. As Adriana Johnson put it, now a decade and a half ago: “Nothing seems to be happening in Latin Americanism.”²

The guiding thread to Dove’s essay is a reading of Erin Graff Zivin’s 2019 *Anarchaeologies: Reading as Misreading*, a book in which the author wagers on *something* happening, but that *something* turns out to have been the first Trump administration. Writes Graff Zivin, by way of concluding her study: “Literature, or aesthetics more broadly—coupled with the possibility of thought, or thinking—emerges as the only sanctuary against or within totalitarianism.”³ It is probably hyperbolic to suggest this is something of a new, more private redemption of the “Schillerian project” of which Dove writes, early in his own field statement book: “In her 2007 essay ‘Literaturas postautónomas,’ Josefina Ludmer argues that the formal subsumption of culture within capitalist production as thematized by Jameson, Hardt and Negri, and Virno signals the exhaustion of the Schillerian project of grounding political democracy in aesthetic experience.”⁴ Put otherwise—and acknowledging the “heuristic” basis on which Dove accepts Ludmer’s periodization, understanding to be sure, that the Schillerian aesthetic ideology was never unchallenged—the “against or within” (my emphasis) of Graff Zivin’s formulation offers a choice: the aesthetic as contestatory redoubt *against* or as protective shelter *within* the neofascist society in which, or in threatening proximity to which, so many of us found and find ourselves living.⁵ Graff Zivin’s appeal to “the only sanctuary”—and I think it would be fair to say, almost all of us who today work as teachers and researchers likely hold on to this appeal in some variation—turns toward a certain appeal to the “aesthetic state,” in which, as Schiller writes, “...everyone is a free citizen, even those who are no more than tools: free citizens who have

rights equal to the most noble, and intellect which violently bends the acquiescent mass to its ends has here to seek assent.”⁶ The aesthetic state or sanctuary offers a virtual site of relative freedom and equality, in which even mere “tools” and the masses may find respite from totalitarian command. To be sure, all of this sounds more appealing than the nakedly administrative justification for our literary-aesthetic endeavor given what, again after Ludmer, Dove calls “formal subsumption.”

Acknowledging Dove’s own analysis of “formal subsumption” and Schillerian “exhaustion” clarifies what is at stake in the choice Graff Zivin identifies in her “against or within,” a choice rooted in an epistemological novelty that I think many of us would prefer to ignore. George Yúdice’s 2003 volume *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* identified this dynamic with a telling anecdote that begins the study: “At a recent meeting of cultural policy specialists, a UNESCO official lamented that culture is invoked to solve problems that previously were the province of economics and politics. Yet, she continued, the only way to convince government and business leaders that it is worth supporting cultural activity is to argue that it will reduce social conflicts and lead to economic development.”⁷ This logic has by now thoroughly spread through all levels of public discourse and university life; the reading of literature—if literature is read—is less a sanctuary for thought or a simulation of democratic life than it is yet another resource for the restraint of increasing social and political conflict. As Yúdice summarizes, “Culture as a resource is a principal component of what might be characterized as a postmodern episteme.”⁸ When the aesthetic—in its “cultural” avatar—becomes mere instrument for the management of the social, from which many better-suited institutions have retreated, it threatens to become the twin face of police violence. While useful, sustaining discourses in recent times, in these American years of lead the dyad “culture-as-resource/aesthetic-as-sanctuary” must give way to some other form, some aesthetico-political militancy that, while not being violence, does not shrink before it.

NOTES

¹ Patrick Dove, "From Out of the Ruins of Latinamericanism: On Reminders, New Beginnings, and Groundlessness in the Contemporary (Latin American) Humanities," *FORMA* 4.1 (2025): 84.

² Adriana Johnson, "Idle Chatter," *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 64.1 (2011): 49.

³ Erin Graff Zivin, *Anarchaeologies: Reading as Misreading* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), p. 158.

⁴ Patrick Dove, *Literature and "Interregnum": Globalization, War, and the Crisis of Sovereignty in Latin America* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016), p. 13.

⁵ Dove, *Literature and "Interregnum,"* 15.

⁶ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (London: Penguin, 2016).

⁷ George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 1.

⁸ Yúdice, 29.