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IN THE FOREGROUND: CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

"BECOMING BELONGED": ROBERTO TEJADA ON THE POLITICAL PROJECT OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND POETRY

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Transcript

Caro Fowler
Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves. In this episode, I speak with Roberto Tejada, a poet and art historian, who's a professor in the creative writing program and department of art history at the University of Houston. We discuss the decade he spent immersed in the literary culture of Mexico City, Roberto discusses the possibilities and limits of what he calls "border thinking" and "becoming belong," as part of his enduring commitment to the idea of encounter as an ethical position and as a way of moving beyond the predicament of extraction.

Roberto Tejada
To think photography through poetry or poetry through photography, their intimacy underlines their differences. It's kind of intimate estrangement--as I would call it--and it leads us to understand history in different ways. Both photography and poetry are future-oriented. They're always thinking about not necessarily what we're seeing in the moment, but how it's redirecting us to the future, how we can re-arrange that future, and how we can manipulate it through our rhetorical engagement with a viewer to activate change. And to me that is the political project of them both.

Caro Fowler
Thank you so much for joining me this morning, Roberto. It's lovely to have you here.

Roberto Tejada
Thank you for having me. I'm really, really pleased.

Caro Fowler
So, usually we kind of warm up or we began talking about one's intellectual history or the formative thinkers in your life. And, you have a very intriguing quote from your most recent book of essays--that I think I already quoted to you--but, you mentioned how growing up as an adolescent in Los Angeles in the 70s and 80s, you received “instruction from educators committed in one form or another to an ethics in keeping with contemporary life and culture, social equity

and introspection for the sake of others. And from then, I learned discernment." So, I'd love for you to expand on this and to discuss who some of these people were and what exactly this means.

Roberto Tejada
Well, I'm really pleased that you're asking me about this. I really haven't spoken much about it in a public way, but it's become much clearer to me how important my early education in Los Angeles [was], both formal and informal. In that essay--which appears *In Still Nowhere in an Empty Vastness*, a book of essays--I close with it because I realized to what degree discernment was a value that drives my research and writing. I went to a Jesuit high school in Los Angeles--Loyola High School--and I now see evermore clearly the degree to which the Jesuit ethos inflects all my writing, both my art historical writing and my imaginative or literary writing. It was the late 1970s/early 1980s when I was in high school—'78 to '82--and many of these Jesuits had not yet been ordained or were in the process of being ordained, but many of them had been advocating and doing their ministry in Latin America. It didn't become clear to me until later that what they really were bringing in their pedagogy and their teaching and their mentorship was a theology of liberation. Many of them had been to Bolivia, many of them had been very active in other parts of Latin America, organizing as well as bringing ministry. This is very much part of the Jesuit ethos of social justice. But in particular with this--I think this is true of the Jesuit ethos in general--it wasn't just the commitment to social practice, but there came with it a sense of irreverence--maybe joyfulness is another way to describe it--that I think comes from the Jesuit tradition of an interest in the literary, but in particular the theater. And this is why, for me, later discovering Roland Barthes and his essay on Loyola, I realized, "Oh, this is exactly what the spiritual exercises were," which is what my education was, which was this intense or radical identification with images and image making. Because it's through that identification that the evangelizing project can take place. But in another less institutional sense, it is the kind of ethos and the ethics of the 'Other' that other Jesuits thinkers and philosophers have really gone into great particularities about, and that is, when you identify with the 'Other,' you're meeting that person, or that object, or that set of practices where they're at. And that's a very different approach or attitude. So, I think that is what I mean by discernment because in the Loyola rites and the spiritual exercises, when you visualize it's an intense form of visualizing the passion. You are actually putting yourself in the position of the 'Other' and feeling all those aspects, both emotional and

intellectual, that will allow you to make a decision that's future-oriented. And that is the value of discernment.

Caro Fowler
That's so interesting. The social justice Jesuits that you talk about it, they stand as a counterpoint to the Jesuits that I often think about from the 17th century. Some are certainly invested in social justice, but [they] have a complex legacy. How does this relationship with the Jesuits--you're thinking about them and the early impact of going to Jesuit school in Los Angeles--correlate with your engagement with Latin America and things like the Latin American Baroque or the ways in which so much of Latin American Baroque writing has dealt with a decolonization of the impact of Rome, the papacy, the Jesuits, and that culture within Latin America?

Roberto Tejada
That's a very interesting question. Of course, the history of the Jesuits is very complex. It's always one--in relationship to the order the Society of Jesus—[of] power. In the 17th century, it's a very different view. I guess what I'm underlining is the impact that post-Vatican II ideals had on various kinds of social justice movements and within the Catholic church and outside of it. But you're right that part of my interest in the post-Vatican II Jesuit project is its relationship to Latin America. A writer that's very important to me, Michel de Certeau, wrote deeply about the Mexican American experience when he was a professor at UC San Diego. Many of the writers that I'm particularly interested in…you may be referring, for example, to the essay in *Still Nowhere in an Empty Vastness* on the mid-20th century Cuban poet Jose Lezama Lima, who sort of activated a tropical version of the Baroque, in which he's looking to so-called Spanish Golden Age expressive paradoxes, formulas, and conceits, but decentering the empire by locating it in the Caribbean. I think what's interesting to me about the Baroque, not as a period and like surrealism--which is why surrealism and the Baroque go so well together, particularly in Latin America--is that they're not necessarily periods consigned to one specific historical period, or moment, but there's the long version of it because they're modalities. The Baroque understands the value of the paradox [that] violence and sensuality can go hand in hand together. And this is only because they're responding to the absolute antagonisms and violences of the colonial project.

Caro Fowler
Yeah, exactly. That's great. Well, moving back a little bit to your intellectual history. I noted that you went to NYU for your...and majored in comparative literature.

Roberto Tejada
Well, for me, it seems that comparative literature and art history go so well together. In a sense what comparative literature was doing--especially back in the 1980s when NYU was the first university in the United States that had comparative literature as an undergraduate major [and] the course of study involved taking courses in art history as well--[was] it saw--what I still believe is the cross currents of the arts: the intermedia and interdisciplinary project, culture in the broadest sense.

Caro Fowler
So, when did you first start writing poetry? And at the same time, when did you first start studying photography? I think of these as kind of the twin intellectual poles grounding your project: photography and poetry. When did you first start engaging with these two distinct forms?

Roberto Tejada
So formally, not until my undergraduate education at NYU, but to go back a little bit further to parallel my formal education at Loyola High School and my Jesuit training was the very vibrant, exuberant, and incredibly stimulating moment that was Los Angeles in the late 1970s and early 80s, especially in the punk, post-punk music/art/sound scene in LA--about which there's now very good scholarship--which was my sort of introduction to poetry, visual arts, and photography, specifically, through various forms: journals, magazines...At the time, [there was] an important institution in Los Angeles, Beyond Baroque. And it's at Beyond Baroque where one of the great bands from Los Angeles, X--Exene Cervenka and John Doe, the lead singers and writers--met. Beyond Baroque was very much part of the underground alternative scene in Los Angeles. So, I was discovering poetry through that particular nexus. The journal *Sulfur* that was edited by Clayton Eshleman was being edited in Los Angeles. I discovered that later, just about when I was graduated from high school, but other journals like the alternative magazine *Slash* had some of the best writing at the level of stylistic prose that was being written by music reviewers who were reviewing the punk bands of the day. Of course, there were some very interesting artists--

Raymond Pettibon--who were sort of involved in that scene--Gary Panter--photographers that I later identified as being the artists that they are today--Harry Gamboa Jr. Some of the images from Asco weren't circulating that [inaudible] Slash, but some of the Slash musicians like The Plugz were interacting with the scenes [like that] in which a group like Asco was involved. So, this is a way of saying that my sort of sentimental education outside of formal training was taking place in the alternative art spaces, galleries, and nightclubs or punk clubs in Los Angeles. When I really began to study poetry and photography was probably to some degree my undergraduate training, which was primarily in literature and comparative literature and then most definitely when I arrived in Mexico City, which was...So, I didn't go to graduate school after my undergraduate degree, I moved to Mexico City, and I really consider the ten or eleven years that I've lived there, my graduate training in many, many ways. I became involved in various formations, some formal, some less formal, but I met photographers like Graciela Iturbide, Maneul Avarez Bravo, and that's when I began to really pursue the historiographies and the theory around photography in tandem with poetry, which had always been part of my very early desire in terms of an identity as a thinker and as a creator.

Caro Fowler
Yeah, so I wanted to talk about that. [I have] so many questions. Was that your first time living outside of the United States when you moved to Mexico City? Also, how did you come across those opportunities? It does make a lot of sense in terms of the impact of the journals growing up in Los Angeles that you would then become part of this literary culture in Mexico City, but how did that begin?

Roberto Tejada
Much of it is luck and the generosity of mentors. When I was at NYU, though he was not a professor there, I met and became friends with the translator, essayist Eliot Weinberger, who has been the translator of Octavio Paz for many, many years. And he suggested that it would be a good idea for me to move to Mexico City and created the pathways for me to meet Octavio. So, I basically saved some money so that I could live for a year in Mexico City, met Octavio Paz, and he offered me a position at his magazine *Vuelta* and that turned into ten or eleven years with other projects intervening as well. It's hard to imagine that that would be as possible today, but the idea of immersing myself in another...and it was a very particular moment. Now you can see it in hindsight, but there were other expats from the United States, from Britain, from other parts of Latin America all

sort of coalescing in Mexico City in the late 1980s and early 1990s and it became a very vibrant and stimulating nexus and location to both interact with other artists and to gain an understanding of who one is, while learning about another culture and interacting in that culture as a kind of insider-outsider.

Caro Fowler
How did living in Mexico City transform your relationship to what it meant to be an American or the United States, and then in turn, the relationship between the US and not only Latin America, but its global presence, perhaps?

Robert Tejada
It's a really profound question because it's one that I am always sort of rethinking and giving a new narrative to because in a sense when I arrived I had very much a sense of being Latino. But being in Mexico, I was a foreigner, and I was an American national. And, so, one has to calibrate what that means and that's very profound, to really realize what the impact of the United States and its policies in places like Mexico and Latin America and to embody that in many, many ways. But also because of my particular training and because Spanish had been encouraged in my household, for me, it was very important to immerse myself and make that a place for my own edification and my own learning experience. My parents are--they're now passed--they were from Colombia, but we're often assumed to be Mexican because we lived in Los Angeles. And so, I always had a makeshift idea about identity or a flexible and movable one and I was given that opportunity in Mexico City because I was interacting with Mexican artists and writers, with artists and writers from Chile, from Colombia, from Argentina, and Mexican Americans who were also coming to Mexico to take part in this very vibrant art scene. There was a moment in which [inaudible] the very vibrant scene in San Antonio, Texas, some of those artists like Alejandro Diaz and Ethel Shipton through my friend Thomas Glassford--who had been living in Mexico City, as long as I had since '87 or '88--was curating exhibitions of Mexican artists and Mexican American artists and traveling those exhibitions in various parts of the United States. So, my sense of being a Latino poet and an art historian in Mexico City was always contingent and in relationship to these other formations around me and the ways in which that was developing. Of course, it's an ongoing project and the way I think about it now is still vital. I was recently having a conversation with the Chicano intellectual and veteran intellectual Tomas Ybarra-Frausto [and] we were thinking about there needs to be a book or some sort of anthology or maybe even an exhibition about Chicano artists and

intellectuals who went to Mexico City in the exuberance of the Chicano arts movement in Los Angeles and elsewhere. Like Harry Gamboa Jr, who went to Mexico City to take part in these photography colloquia called [inaudible], Rupert Garcia, many of these artists felt that it was necessary to imbibe from the vast mural that is Mexican arts and culture and what it means to Mexican Americans in the United States.

Caro Fowler
That somewhat tangentially gets me to another question that I've heard you discuss a little bit in interviews and I've also heard colleagues discuss--and this gets us a little bit more specifically into art history--but the reception and development of Latinx art within the US and the ways in which--for reasons that I've heard many people discuss-- there's still a feeling despite growing awareness, projects, and exhibitions that the theoretical depth and the ways in which its relationship to challenging art historical ideas of nationalism, still remains so peripheral. And there's a way in which, still, somehow, the discipline of art history, museums, and collectors can't quite get their heads around it.

Roberto Tejada
I recently had a conversation with Mari Carmen Ramirez, who's my colleague in Houston at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston who interacts with collectors on a very regular basis and I also am a member of a very important, relatively-new organization called USLA, US Latinx Art Forum, that was organized precisely to address the questions that you're asking. But one is--importantly, as you're underlining--that in US American art historical discourse, both at the museum level, university level, and even in the general public's understanding, there's still confusion about the difference between Latin American and Latinx, that is Latin American descendant peoples in the United States, who, on the one hand, share a commonality, but also an enormous array of differences. There is a way in which histories of art around countries of origin from Latin America and the histories of art in terms of Latinx practitioners in United States are conflated, under-recognized, or marginalized from the debate. To speak from my own personal experience, when I went to graduate school there were relatively few PhD programs in which Latin American art was offered. I think we're in a changing topography and space in which there have been many more Latin Americanists who are being hired in art history departments and now have been teaching for the last 20 years, both Latin American and Latin American descendant aesthetics in the United States. We're seeing a new generation of

Latins art historians who are beginning to teach and publish to make very clear those distinctions between Latinx and Latin American and why those distinctions matter politically, precisely because one of the reasons that Latinx artists practicing in the United States now are marginalized is because given the opportunity for museums to collect art from underrepresented peoples, they will often side with something that seems familiar, which would be a Latin American artist that collectors are eager to have in museums, repositories, and collections. And Latinx artists, once again, are sidelined in this regard. So, those distinctions are important precisely because there are narratives about what it means to inhabit--especially in the recent political atmosphere--Latinx, and different Latinx identities, in an increasingly sort of illiberal and nationalistic discourse at the national level and what impact that might have for art history and other artistic practices.

Caro Fowler
Another question I had about the ways in which living in Mexico City impacted your thinking--and this is a little more specific--but I noted in your writings on photography, as any theorist of photography does, your consistent references and thinking through Walter Benjamins work, which is so deeply tied to European capitals. But I've also read, kind of tangentially, that there is a way in which Benjamin was actually influenced by burgeoning academic work happening within pre-Columbian studies and that he attended some lectures and possibly his ideas on time are impacted by these, but I'm kind of curious how does the palimpsest that is Mexico City impact or change perhaps some of the writings around photography that Benjamin produces?

Roberto Tejada
Again, that's a very deep and profound question. And this is interesting because there are references in the *Arcades Project* and elsewhere to evidence Benjamin's knowledge of, perhaps contact with pre-conquest objects, and then thinking about these. So, that would be interesting to pursue. Benjamin has been so important to me and I go back [and] always sort of read...not only to speak of his prose style, which I think also activates a kind of immersion in which the argument is not necessarily moving from A to B to C, but it's mobile and it's moving in these very angular and kind of discontinuous forms, which I think are performing his ideas about the palimpsests and about these layerings of history. I was reading Benjamin in Mexico City, both in English translation and in Spanish translation, and he did impact me on many of the great thinkers. I immediately

think of the late great Carlos Monsiváis, who has not quite been translated as he should be in English. He was very prolific and another great prose stylist. He wrote about popular culture and in a sense, he was really thinking post-colonial studies through his form, which was the essay and what is called the Chronica--or the Chronicle, the urban Chronicle--but you know, he was thinking about popular art, like the calendar artists [inaudible]. He was thinking about boxing, Julio César Chávez. He was really one of the first thinkers of LGBTQ politics and aesthetics in Mexico. And much of his vocabulary is really tied to Benjamin and he would often talk about the theology of the multitude. In a sense, this idea of mass culture was of supreme importance to Benjamin and thinking through what the implications of that would be and mass culture in Mexico City in the late 20th century has its own particularities. In a city that is the most populated city in the world, the kind of density and the palimpsest which we're referring to which is what foreigners and visitors to Mexico City and inhabitants of the city itself, live on a daily basis. It's almost impossible to escape visually and architecturally in the built environment the layers of the colonial project. You're seeing pre-conquest ruins, colonial buildings that were built out of those pre-conquest edifices, modern buildings of the 20th century, and then postmodern buildings all sort of in one assemblage that is chaotic and has its own particular logic. But it speaks of the ways in which history is inhabited in this multitudinous, simultaneous way and I think that's a very Benjaminian idea. Monsiváis also--and it's on it's available for viewing on the internet--produced a short film with the Italian Venezuelan photographer Paulo Gasparini, in which there are many citations of Benjamin and in the photographic practice of Gasperini was seeing the impact of US imperialism as another layer of the ways in which it impacts Latin American cities that forms this kind of ritual of chaos. That is a phrase from Carlos Monsiváis--that is, the ways in which we can think about the everyday and the historical process [or] the ways in which we experience the city, in this case Mexico City, as this layering of deep residues from the colonial project and present day residues.

Caro Fowler
Yeah, that makes sense. And that brings to mind [what you said about] reading Benjamin [in] both Spanish and English. Do you consider English your mother tongue? I know that you engage so much with translation and you translate poetry quite a bit. What does it mean for you working between these two languages? And what do you take from Spanish that you can't take from English and vice versa?

Roberto Tejada
My understanding of that changes from week to week, and from year to year. But theoretically, if our mother tongue is precisely the language that our mother spoke to us, Spanish would be my mother tongue, but socializing cannot be underestimated. I was socialized in English. So, I really had to relearn Spanish in many ways. I mean, it was spoken at home. I studied it, both in high school and, and at the university level. I did my third year abroad in Madrid, Spain, which was a very important experience for me. But learning to write it was something that I really wanted to command. And living in Mexico City, I was being asked to write short articles and essays, and I began to write art history and art criticism in Spanish in Mexico. I really do feel as if it's a kind of left-handed, right-handed experience that I feel much more comfortable because I'm right-handed in English. The octaves are available to me in English in ways that they're not entirely in Spanish. So, I feel somewhat left-handed in Spanish, but I'm able to write in both, usually in Spanish--because of my insistence on a particular kind of style--through the assistance of a copy editor. But to answer your question, I do think that the English that I very much choose to dwell in and inhabit in my writing is one that's very much inflected by Spanish language syntax, that is one that is interested in the kinds of syntax in which many subordinate clauses can be dependent on the particular argument and that it's the subordinate clauses that actually are performing the continuities of thought. But we don't think in subject verb object sentences, we really don't think that way. So how do we allow the exuberance of thought, which I think [inaudible] brought into Spanish and other Romance languages? How do we allow that into English? And then vice versa? I think I've been told that when I write in Spanish, it has elements of a kind of linearity, that I would attribute it to a US American, mainstream style.

Caro Fowler
To the point. I've read in many of your writings--and you're quite blatant about it—you're thinking through the relationship between poetry and political thought or the ability of poetry to take on politics. I've also read about your appreciation of Adrienne Rich and there does seem to be a strong correlation there in your appreciation of her work. [I am also] thinking of one of my own favorite quotes about poetry [which] is [from] Audrey Lorde saying that [poetry is] the most economical and describing it as something that women can do between shifts at work and on scraps of paper. I was just kind of curious to hear more about your thinking in terms of the relationship between politics and poetry and how that does or does not play out in regards to the relationship

between photography, at least the ways in which these different investments of yours intersect?

Roberto Tejada
I love that quote of Audrey Lorde. It describes a practice in which the means of making a living often prevented one from having the kind of time and the luxury of time for writing. The check that she's referring to…So this idea of stealing time, I identify with that wonderful French phrase that Michel de Certeau writes very deeply about, the idea of *la perruque*, that stealing time from your employer is a really interesting political tactic in itself. I don't know how many poets are able to pursue the pathway that Audrey Lorde outlines, but it's a very seductive one because it speaks of how there's an urgency to writing poetry no matter what and one finds and steals the time, regardless. In terms of what poetry and photography in terms of its political interventions can lead to--again, Adrienne Rich's work is very, very meaningful to me, especially the the later work and she was very involved with photography--I'm recalling now a poem that she wrote about Tina Modotti and this idea of the political possibilities that the poem can bring in the ways that humanitarian photography was able to do. I think this goes back to the documentary poetics of the 1930s as well--you know, Muriel Rukeyser and others--who are thinking poetry through photography as there are photographers who I think photography through poetry. Manuel Avarez Bravo, for example, definitely thinks of the images as a set of relationships or analogies that are similar to a poem. But to think photography through poetry or poetry through photography is just leading me to think about an array of practitioners that I'm drawn to, what I would call an intimate estrangement between language and the photographic image. The Czech media philosopher who lived in Sao Paulo and wrote in Portuguese and English and German and other languages Vilem Flusser wrote that what happens between a photographic image and language--let's call it poetry--is that their intimacy underlines their differences. This kind of intimate estrangement, as I would call it, leads us to understand history in different ways. Language allows us to see how scenes become processes and context becomes texts. I think that I'm interested in poets who, like Adrienne Rich, are thinking poetry through photography. In a sense, what they're trying to do is bring that element of the historical document that a photograph can be--the humanitarian project, that it can move forward--and making us aware of conditions that we would otherwise not be aware of. And at the same time, [they] bring the kind of formal potentials that a poem can produce that a photograph is incapable of doing which is also

creating networks of relationships through syntax and language that opens up something...Both photography and poetry are future-oriented. They're always thinking about not necessarily what we're seeing in the moment, but how it's redirecting us to the future and how we can rearrange that future and how we can manipulate it through our rhetorical engagement with a viewer to activate change, change emotions, change attitudes and beliefs. To me, that is the political project of both of them.

Caro Fowler
Right. How in turn does this engagement with poetry and language--and things like teaching creative writing and being embedded in multiple departments within your academic appointments--How does that...Obviously you are very much an art historian and often called upon to be an expert within the discipline and there is a way I would argue in which you still approach it somewhat obliquely. What do you think is your particular understanding of the discipline of art history? Or what does teaching creative writing and being invested in poetry allow you to see within art history or to activate that might be particular to your own project?

Roberto Tejada
I align myself with a tradition of art historians who have always been deeply engaged with poetry on one level, as far back as Henri Focillon and the art historians that he trained at Yale. Or we can think of someone like Georges Didi-Huberman. Or Michael Ann Holly, who speaks of this particular mode of visual captivation, that what the poetic word can bring to art history is to emphasize [or to] make resonant and highlight this idea of a visual captivation. It's a wonderful play on words because it's not only the hard work of description to capture that which is visual. As Michael Baxandall says, 'Language is a conspiracy against experience' because he wants to reduce everything to the simplest terms. How do you capture it in language, but then also, how is the art historian as a writing subject captivated and changed? And how is their desire [or] fantasy activated in such a way that one can change the commonsense understandings of history of cause and effect through the poetic word? I think this is an important project for art history. I know there are those who would disagree with me. But I do believe that we can use form as a pathway. Form is the pathway to thought. Not only is [it] a pathway, it embodies thoughts. So, [if] we think formally about art history and the writing as a formal project, how can we use the materiality of language and the possibility of genres? We know that art

historical writing--like any historical writing--is [inaudible], proposed or submitted, a literary form. It uses the techniques of fiction. There's no need to hide those--not that everyone needs to write like Georges Didi-Huberman--but one can take pleasure and explore and find experimental ways of approaching historical periods, objects, cultural practices, through the opportunities and the possibilities of form, which means that we can reconstruct this idea that history is forward-moving, that it's progressive, that it has a teleology or an endpoint of some sort. We can really think art historically, as really writing about the present. I have to relate this [to] John Goddard [who] said 'every story has a beginning, middle and end, just not in that order.' Those art histories that interest me the most are ones that understand that the stories we tell have a beginning, middle and end, but not necessarily in that order.

Caro Fowler
That gets me to a question I had from your most recent book of essays, *Still Nowhere in an Empty Vastness*, and what I perceived as a tension within the essays, which you said you'd written over a very long period of time. The beginning starts with these two narratives, chronicles of Europeans, essentially their brief embedding within indigenous communities and the modes of communication and miscommunication and violence that ensued. Then, at the end of the book--and the whole book seems to me a meditation on border and what it means to exist within a border, which is obviously also a physical commitment of yours, as you just told me you're exploring the Borderlands of Texas and Mexico right now--but I'm curious about this kind of border thinking and its relationship to the end of the book in which you meditate on this idea of becoming belonged? It seems like, in some ways, you are charting your own evolution and I imagine that the word in that that's key is ‘becoming’ suggesting that it's always a process. But I would be curious to hear about this evolution and how you came to ‘becoming belonged’ and what that means to your theorization of borders?

Roberto Tejada
It warms my heart that you notice that evolution because it's really important to me in the way I organize that book. It's very important to me that I began that book of essays which was structured precisely to activate the ways in which I think the form of the essay, which Adorno rightly said, 'abrogates the ideal,' it makes the ideal impossible. So, I was beginning to see how my own intellectual trajectory from the beginning of those first essays, which are about twenty-

seven years old, to the final essay, which is a kind of accounting for the panorama of what it means to have traveled that pathway, could mean. Border thinking was so important to me in my training, thinking with authors like Gloria Anzaldúa, poet Alfred Arteaga, the theoretician Walter Mignolo, who really thinks about border thinking as a way of refuting centralizing projects, refuting relativism, and really thinking about the uncontrollability of the historical process itself. And border thinking is a way of accounting for the hierarchies of power, but in its most hopeful and optimistic sense, also how to think techniques of living together. So those two essays at the beginning of *Still Nowhere in an Empty Vastness*, the first one pits the chronicles and the relations written by Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca with...and it is a sort of hemispheric project because then I compare it to Mary Rowlandson's narrative. In a way, it was a decoy in many ways to get to the end, where I really wanted to talk about Katherine Anne Porter and Hart Crane, which I do only in a footnote. These are the kind of borders I was setting historically about comparing the two colonizing projects of the United States and the Southwest or this part of what is now the Mexico-US border lands. Border thinking as a metaphor has its limits as well. If my book and my research in general leans towards something, it is trying to think as generously as possible about the atrocities of the past, which is a very difficult thing to do without remaining in just the judgment and trying to see what it was about the modern project, say the 20th century, that looked to the Cabeza de Vaca or to contemporary poets who are looking to Mary Rowlandson and then seeing by the end as I'm creating this panorama or this this mural effect of these essays that link Harry Gamboa Jr. with Elian Gonzalez and Pablo Elguerra--just to name a few--[that] the trouble with metaphor is that I think it allows us to think and to activate attitudes and energies, but they also speak to catastrophes of the past. So, 'becoming belonged' in that final essay was a way of showing the limits of my language, the limits of my project, through very recent critical Indigenous Studies thinking in the work of Eve Tuck, for example, who very rightly says that 'nowhere' is not a metaphor. So, to call my book *Still Nowhere in an Empty Vastness* is troublesome in that context, and yet, I would say that what she proposes--if I understand correctly--in 'becoming belonged' is a kind of ethics. It's moving with great care, tentatively, but not disengaging. It's to say that we can't ignore the brutalities of the past. To pronounce judgment is only a partial project. So, 'becoming belonged' is, how do we move towards something that might be a future way of thinking in which I may not be the right person to be articulating it, but I'm in the process of becoming belonged to a set of ideas and practices and critiques that are what I'm referring to in that in that final project.

One of the things I'm thinking through right now--and I hope it will be formalized in some kind of essay--is there's been very important writing that critiques the extractive nature of racial capitalism. I want to think of how it is possible to hold onto the idea of encounter. So, how to pit maybe the translational, as a way of thinking through or moving beyond the predicament of extraction because I really do believe in encounter and maybe this goes back to my inclination towards thinkers like Michel de Certeau, that it's the encounter that is the ethical position. In the present as historians, we cannot change what took place in the past, we can change the ethical outlook and the tonalities of an emotional and caring response to it in the present. To me, that is the act of translation.

Caro Fowler
It's really beautiful.

Roberto Tejada
Oh, it's been such a pleasure, Caro.

Caro Fowler
Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information about this episode, and links to the books, articles, and artworks discussed, please consult clarkart.edu/rap/podcast. The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations by committing to build a more inclusive and equitable space for all. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey and myself with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn and additional support provided by Jessie Sentivan.