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THE PRESENCE OF IMMIGRANTS, OR WHY MEXICANS AND ARABS LOOK ALIKE

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I. The Presence of Walls

Nothing seems more in the news lately than walls. Walls go up in Arizona, they come down – for a moment at least – in Gaza. They divide Israel from the West Bank (while redefining significant areas of Palestinian territory as Israeli) and they seem destined to play a part in the future of Iraq where partition seems one possible solution to on-going and shifting divisions among ethnic and religious groups. Though Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht argues in *The Production of Presence* that those who study culture and literature have been too concerned with meaning and not enough with presence, the implications of his argument also makes the meaning of these seemingly omnipresent walls more vividly apparent. For the presence of these walls all over the globe means something and that meaning makes a certain kind of presence more difficult to sense and more important to consider.

To build a wall along a border is a forceful materialization of an imaginary creation, a special kind of literalization of a fictional trope. A familiar cliché holds that from an air plane no borders are visible. To trace a border with a wall makes an imaginative division into a brutal fact. So the question of what these walls might 'mean' comes up quite naturally. One might say that these walls around the world pose the question of their own meaning, or, in Gumbrecht's terms, that they are one crucial example of «the things of the world…[that] oscillate between presence effects and meaning effects»[1]. They lend a certain unexpected pointedness to Gumbrecht's attractive polemic «in favor of a not exclusively meaning-based relationship to the world» (53) and to his appeal for more attention to moments of intensity or «the intense quietness of presence» (137). Who has not experienced what Gumbrecht poignantly evokes as a longing for «those short moments of concentration on 'the things of the world' and the intense quietness that comes with it» (138)? But these walls, these particular things of the world, remind a sympathetic observer of the «tension between presence and meaning» (136) that – more than a simple celebration of presence over meaning – Gumbrecht claims as the «leitmotif» (136) of his book.

The strain of Heideggerian nostalgia that inflects Gumbrecht's appeal for a

[1] H. U. Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), xv. Subsequent references to Gumbrecht's book appear in the text.

return to a less mediated appreciation of aesthetic experience in the world finds that the division of the world into spirit and matter and of the subject into mind and body stands as the root cause of human alienation. Gumbrecht writes that Heidegger «articulated a widespread discontent with the intellectual loss of the world outside human consciousness»:

> From Heidegger's perspective, at least, Husserl's phenomenology was merely the endpoint of a millenary philosophical trajectory in which the subject/object paradigm – that is, the conceptual configuration of the ongoing divergence between human existence and the world, based on the contrast between human existence as purely spiritual and the world as a purely material sphere – had lead Western culture to an extreme state of alienation from the world (66).

The production of meaning, the vocation of the humanist, seems the symptom of this alienation for the work of interpretation holds the objects scrutinized at a distance however closely read they may be. What humanist has not sensed this barrier dividing the interpreting self from itself and from others? Who has not felt, as Jean Luc-Nancy has put it and as Gumbrecht cites him, that «there is nothing we find more tiresome today than the production of yet another nuance of meaning, of just a 'little more sense'» (105) and also, as a corollary, «how hopeless it was for the humanities to try and justify their existence by pointing to some 'social function' or 'political yield'» to be gained from their hermeneutic endeavors or exegetical elaborations (133)[2]. And yet, against the grain of Gumbrecht's attempt to turn attention from meaning to presence, the very presence of the world as it arrives through fallible senses and unreliable communications networks raises difficult ethical and political questions that have an aesthetic dimension and produce moments of intensity of their own. These worldly moments may call into question or reinforce the neat dichotomy's of subjects and objects reinforcing or relieving alienation from the world. But they make present intensities that remark the tensions between presence and meaning that pose political and ethical questions, whatever relevance or force the answers to those questions humanists may propose might possess.

Gumbrecht himself seems alive to this problem when he acknowledges the ambivalent implications of those aestheticized images of the world the media daily present:

> But if watching a war that is an ocean and a continent away from us can definitely repress even the thought of what a war means to those who are physically close to it, if the floating images on the screens that are our world may become a barrier that separates us forever from the things of the world, those same screens may also reawaken a fear of and a desire for the substantial reality we have lost. Clearly our reactions can go either way (139).

The presence of the world as a mediated object can become one of the barriers separating us from the world and it can become the beginning of a crucial

[2] See J.-L. Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. B. Holmes and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 5.

imagining of some other thing, some less alienated relationship – reactions can and do go either way. So the question of barriers, of imagination, and of walls, reappears here transposed from the world into the metaphorical substance of theoretical speculation. With all the real walls in the world, it seems difficult to say whether this transposition of material reality and figurative language is a symptom of too much or too little meaning, too much or too little presence. Or does it remark the inevitable and necessary tension between meaning and presence Gumbrecht notes? Attending to that tension might help recover a less alienating relationship to the world and to those who suffer in it.

II. I LESS IN GAZA

Consider a concrete case of how difficult the tension between meaning and presence in the contemporary world can be to negotiate. Presence and meaning, the meaning of war and the presence of walls, seem especially vexed in the contemporary Middle East, a part of the world that seems especially full of intensities but devoid of quietness. Consider this document from the media, a newspaper photo of a wall on the Egyptian border with Gaza at the end of last January.

New York Times, Sunday, January 27, 2008 A 24.

I call this a photograph of a wall, despite the figures in the foreground, because the wall in this image dominates the composition. The wall is the story. In this remarkably unremarkable photo, the people standing in front of the over arching

ruin of the Israeli built barrier separating Gaza from Egypt – they might be a mother, daughter, and three younger children though this information is absent from the news – seem, with their plastic sacks of provisions, actually to be dematerializing into the landscape. This is an effect of photographic over exposure, poor resolution, and dust, an accident as it were, of various contingencies, but an aesthetic effect nonetheless. Similarly, the hard dark outline of the twisted iron corrugations of the wall, including the large square area that once no doubt housed the locked gate and now seems a frame around a mirror – so similar is the ground on one side of the wall and the other (though the piles of windowless concrete dwellings glimpsed through the hole belong unmistakably to Gaza) – dominates the photo and seems to physically press upon the figures in the foreground. In one sense, looking at this quintessentially ephemeral photo while drinking morning coffee, I could not be more distant from the sort of aesthetically charged moments, the moments of intensity, to which Gumbrecht asks his readers to attend. And yet this photo, and especially the nearly invisible eyes of its figures, especially the almost absent eyes of the children, arrested my gaze and forced upon my sleepy senses a riveting intensity of its own. These are figures without eyes, whose subjectivity does not register in this medium, and who seem about to dematerialize into the landscape that over determines their meaning while it threatens to erase their presence. I thought something like this while I looked at this photo and thus the thought of what war means for those who suffer it began to take shape within my consciousness spurred by an image that seemed to erase those whose presence I found myself wanting to know. I don't think most people who saw the newspaper that Sunday morning had this experience.

The 'news', of course, is not about aesthetics but the world. But its messages continuously call that distinction into question. In practice we are hard pressed to distinguish these things. This is a photo that produced in me, at least, an aesthetic effect and that effect, visceral as it is, relates to a set of meanings that require articulation and a set of meanings that require disarticulation, meanings full of potential insights and actual distortions – glimpses through the barriers of difference and distance – pertaining to one fraught story in the news of the world today. One thing that struck me, between the eyes so to speak, was the way in which in this composition the wall seems present, the people seem or seem about to become, absent, dissolving into the landscape before my eyes. The disappearing bodies give the eyes of the children, especially the eyes of the boy who gazes at us and the girl who clutches some treat or package (a toy? lentils? apricot paste?) their nearly unbearable poignancy. Here there seems to be a geopolitical truth too often made absent from our 'debates' about the world these people and we ourselves inhabit today and ironically made present, made visceral for me for a moment, in this photo – borders matter people are immaterial. From our point of view in the distant West these Eastern conflicts often seem devoid of people but full of geopolitical meaning. That's one thing, one might say, this picture in the newspaper seems to 'mean'. Which raises a question that Gumbrecht might recognize as worthy. When faced with this picture, how do we restore the presence

of eyes like our own, of subjectivities we can recognize, to the figures in it? How do we make the distant other present to ourselves with any immediacy? Can the mediated suffering of others ever be a moment of intensity for us? Can it ever have real meaning for us?

Among the many forms of exhaustion – economic, political, spiritual – circulating in the world today, perhaps the exhaustion with meaning should for a moment take center stage. In both Gumbrecht's *The Production of Presence* and Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Birth to Presence* from which Gumbrecht takes his point of departure, the challenge to meaning, the attention to «what meaning cannot convey» to cite Gumbrecht's subtitle, comes not from an exuberant embrace of the body but from a sense of having reached a point of exhaustion in or with the hermeneutic project. But what does Gumbrecht's salutary turn away from meaning and toward 'moments of intensity' (a nod to Heidegger, certainly, but to Pater as well) suggest we do about those moments of intensity with which the world news visits us daily. This is no criticism of aesthetics for turning its back on the world – or rising above it as Gumbrecht might say. Those moments of sublimity art and nature afford seem far too precious not to cherish. But I wish to consider the ways in which meaning and aesthetics, ethics and intensity, our viscera and the world, remain difficult to disentangle in ways that elucidate the promise and the challenge of Gumbrecht's attempt to distance us aesthetes from a world based on meaning.

What might it take to make the woman in this photo with her children on Palestine's southern boarder present to a reader on a given Sunday morning in mid winter in western New York State? For this is less a picture of human beings than it is a snap shot of a geo-political situation and one that in the United States, at least, nearly everyone has very strong feelings about. So the presence of this photo, as arresting as it may be, does not stand independent of meaning. The meanings with which the image and the figures in it are surcharged interrupt or mediate the viewers relationship to the people the photo represents. Few of us in 2008 can actually see these people as presences in the sense that Gumbrecht asks us to experience presence at all. Simply put, that in itself poses a certain political and ethical problem. The difficulty of actually experience the other has, of course, been familiar for a very long time, and has left its trace not only on philosophy, but on literature generally and on American literature in particular. What surprises me a bit is that it seems increasingly clear to me that this is fundamentally an aesthetic question. And if in the history of modern western thought and the history of modern western art, one considers how presence manifests itself, the imbrications of presence and meaning, politics and feeling, become interestingly apparent.

III. PRESENCE AS THE IMMIGRATION OF THE OTHER

One of the meanings carried by the image of the Palestinian woman and her family that makes them difficult to see attaches to the meaning of words like refugee and immigrant. For the wall behind her, all will recognize, signifies the

Gaza strip and the Gaza strip means people displaced by the foundation of Israel as a Jewish state, people who have lived in Gaza for a long time and who find themselves now strangers in what they consider to be their own land. One of the endless struggles over possession and dispossession that has enervated the region's tragic politics (and these tragic politics furnish another meaning of this photo of people and a wall) has to do with who gets to call themselves at home and who gets to be labeled an immigrant. Anyone who has followed any of the conflicts in the region over the last many years will recognize that the answer to this question does not simply reside in facts about who actually was in residence where or in legal possession of what in 1946 or 1968. It has everything to do with imaginative meanings assigned to certain pieces of real estate by the hopes and aspirations and interpretations of Zionist settlers on the one hand and indigenous peoples only recently come to think of themselves as a nation on the other. For some Zionists in recent decades it has to do with meanings assigned to the Torah and for some Palestinians even more recently it has to do with meanings assigned to Koran. It is far too easy to make too much of the religious dimension of this conflict in ways that are similar, as I hope to make apparent, to the ways in which it is far too easy to make too much of the cultural differences separating U. S. citizens and the immigrants who seem always to be threatening its national borders.

There is also no easy equivalence between the claims of Zionists on the one hand and Palestinians on the other, each side with its history of atrocities suffered and committed. Any examination of actual death tolls over the years, any comparison of the difference in living conditions obtaining in Israel and in Palestine, should convince any impartial observer that the Palestinian people, whatever else one might say, suffer disproportionately in this conflict. But unscrambling the historical claims of each and the present injustices each side perpetrates and suffers goes considerably beyond the discussion here. Focus for a moment on the manner in which the presence of an other, an immigrant, an alien entity within identity's enclosure, is far from being a special case in the confrontation of selves with others in the world and might in fact be the most perfectly evident case of what the presence of the other might mean in ethical and aesthetic terms.

Consider for a moment a certain genealogy that associates ethics and aesthetics. The presence of others, the question of ethics, has entailed, at least since David Hume and Adam Smith, aesthetics in a way closely akin to what Gumbrecht means by presence. For these thinkers and many others in the canons of Western metaphysics attempt to place the presence of others, that crucial aspect of the world, beyond questions of meaning by making the sense of the other an aesthetic or bodily experience. It is a question, of course, of that central discursive formation of eighteenth century moral philosophy, sympathy.

Modern speculation on psychology begins with what is recognizably a question of aesthetics and of presence: namely David Hume's discovery, in his analysis of sympathy, that others or their feelings are present within what Locke had imagined to be the empty closure of the self:

'Tis indeed evident [Hume writes], that when we sympathize with the passions and sentiments of others, these movements appear at first in our minds as mere ideas, and are conceiv'd to belong to another person, as we conceive any other matter of fact. 'Tis also evident, that the ideas of the affections of others are converted into the very impressions they represent, and that the passions arise in conformity to the images we form of them. All this is an object of the plainest experience, and depends not on any hypothesis of philosophy[3].

Hume notes that in our plainest experiences we experience the feelings of others – their passions and sentiments – as a sort of rematerialization of the other within the sensory precincts of our own being. The feelings of the other migrate innocuously, first as mere ideas or – let's say – images and then take up residence with the possibly insidious immediacy of actual impressions, giving rise to the very passions and sentiments of the other within the borders of our selves.

For Adam Smith, famously, the question of sympathy grounds moral thought and, as in Hume, trespasses on the boundaries that we usually assume divide us from other people and the world. At the beginning of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith writes that when we witness «our brother […] upon the rack»:

By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels[4].

For Smith, even more clearly than Hume, sympathy – our involuntary and unavoidable association of ourselves with those around us which, Smith begins by saying, even the greatest ruffians and the most selfish in some degree share (11) – brings the other home to ourselves, breaches the wall that separates self and other and makes the other's pain to some extent involuntarily our own, «we […] tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels».

Here, I think, lies one important explanation for the odd proliferation of barriers and walls so prevalent today. What ever geo-political policies and material ambitions legitimate them, these walls create a protective distance that human sympathies always in some measure threatened to breach. While they seem intended to keep foreigners out, they more importantly expel or abject the strangers who, we struggle not to think, are already at home in our hearts and minds. In the picture above, the woman's presence and her suffering are distanced by the meanings ascribed to the wall behind her. Even her clothes come laden with significances that conceal not only her body but her being. The scarf on her head might signify Moslem piety and allegiance to Hamas, or it might afford the sort of

[3] D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1980) 1.2.xi, 319-320.
[4] A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. K. Haakonssen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11-12.

protection against wind and weather that women of my mother's generation seldom left home without. In the context of contemporary American and Western understandings of Arab women, a headscarf cannot but resonate with religious and political meanings. Like the meaning of the wall – protective barrier or punitive enclosure – Arab women's heads in the East and in the West remain very much an issue of contention, and very few Arab women actually get to be present in the dispute[5].

In the realm of politics, whose borders Gumbrecht's impatience with meaning would like to leave at least momentarily behind, sympathy and presence have long played a complicated part especially when artists have dreamed that an aesthetics (for what is the question of fellow feeling and compassion but an aesthetic question?) of sympathy might settle moral and political issues on a more solid basis than the seemingly endless and endlessly wearing contentions of news media and political debate seem to allow. In this connection, any student of sympathy within the borders of the United States thinks immediately of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* whose appeal to 'right' feeling originates in the author's own fatigue with the meanings of the world, a fatigue similar to the weariness Gumbrecht and Nancy register as they turn away from meaning and toward presence. «See, then, to your sympathies in this matter!» she enjoins her readers speaking of slavery at her novel's end, for your sympathies, if they be in harmony with Christ's, will preserve your sensibility and judgment from the perversions of «worldy policy» and its «sophistries»[6]. Earlier in the novel, readers will remember, Stowe offers an object lesson in how such sympathies communicate (perhaps propagate would be a better word) through presence. In an oft-cited chapter, Stowe takes the reader in to a U. S. senator's home. There she stages a debate between the senator and his wife on the vexatious issue of slavery. Mrs. Bird urges slavery's end and condemns the dehumanizing cruelty of the fugitive laws, but Senator Bird sticks to the worldy wisdom of sectional compromise, property rights, and patriotic duty to demonstrate the necessity of passing ever more stringent laws to punish slaves and protect the nation. «I hate reasoning, John», Mrs. Bird declares, and swears that at the first chance she gets to break the laws her husband has taken an oath to uphold she will do so. This argument ends only when the senator finds Eliza, the novel's fugitive slave mother and her child, materialized in his kitchen and discovers himself to be «quite amazed at the sight that presented itself» (90). The painful sight of the suffering and shivering woman actually present, really presented, and making itself a presence in his home proves too much for Senator Bird's defensive structure, his personal wall of worldly meanings. «The magic of the real presence of distress, – the imploring human eye, the frail, trembling human hand, the despairing appeal of helpless agony –, these he had never tried. He had never thought that a fugitive

[5] See T. Assad, «French Secularism and the 'Islamic Veil Affair'», *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture* (Spring and Summer 2006): 93-106.

[6] H. Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*, introd. D. Pickney (New York: Signet, 1966, 1998), 480.

might be a hapless mother, a defenseless child […]» (99). He feels her pain and acts accordingly. Stowe tries to make that presence work on and for her readers as well, by representing the figure of the stranger, the fugitive, the other as a human presence, within the homely walls and hearts of her characters[7]. Through the wall-breaching power of sympathy, presence makes itself felt for the sophistical senator and the susceptible reader: the appeal of suffering cannot be denied and it silences worldly sophistries whose noisy disputations too easily alienate human sensibilities from the world. Senator Bird experiences here something like a moment of intensity, but it carries a meaning with it that gives the lie to the meanings of the world and, Stowe hopes, puts an end to further disputation. Here presence and art seemed entwined with politics and meaning in ways that require further thought about the meaning or the appeal of the New York Times newspaper photograph, the production of presence, and the dialectical tension between presence and meaning that Gumbrecht's work indicates.

IV. THE PRESENCE OF IMMIGRANTS AFTER SEPTEMBER 11TH

The events of September 11th that those in the news love to say changed everything did not, in fact, change much (except for the lives tragically touched by Al Quaeda's murderous attacks) if what one means by change entails a fundamental redefinition of the world and America's place in it. There was an imperial American presence in the world before the towers fell, there is an imperial American presence in the world today. But the catastrophe did affect many things, from the weakening of civil liberties and the legitimation of torture in the United States to the destruction of lives and livelihoods in Iraq and Afghanistan. It has altered the relationship of the United States to other nations and has worsened the lot of immigrant workers within its borders. Of course, none of this, neither bad diplomacy nor mistreated foreigners, is new. Those of us who work in or on the United States know that a strain of nativist paranoia is precisely native to many strains of political discourses in the U.S. and has been for a long time. What Paul Smith calls American Primitivism seems primitive not only because of its regressive appeal to brute, resonant simplifications, but because a certain antipathy to outsiders – to specific outsiders – has marked the nation's national discourse since its founding. In the eighteenth century, before the nation was founded, Franklin inveigled against Germans and other tawny races that might blight the purity of the pale-skinned America he imagined and Jefferson warned of Africans and other heterogeneous peoples who would distemper the temperate republic of which he dreamed and make it a «distracted mass»[8]. Commentators as various as

[7] That Stowe's characters become caricatures and are not real people at all has too often been noted to require mention here except to add that there is no very easy way to distinguish the aesthetic effect of presence and the real presence of others. In all human dealings with the world, some element of schematization or caricature seems to play a part.

[8] See P. Smith, *Primitive America: The Ideology of Capitalist Democracy* (Minneapolis: University

the Harvard professor Samuel Huntington and the populist firebrand Michael Savage continue this distinguished line of attack today. So much remains the same. But after 9/11 much seems different at as well. And one of the effects of 9/11 is to mask that similarity and the difference too.

One important difference occurs at the level of American public discourse. After 9/11, the extremely teutonic sounding phrase Homeland Security became an American idiom. Under its cover popular pundits and administration officials explicitly linked problems of immigration – heretofore an economic and especially a labor problem – to problems of national security. Anxiety about terrorism colored worries about undocumented labor and did much to confuse both issues[9]. But immigration, like terrorism, seldom gets discussed in reasonable terms. Like terrorism, immigration has become part of a primitive sort of discursive panic. The response to this panic has been to look to the nation's walls, less with any real hope to seal the border (which would be disastrous were it possible) than with the phanstasmatic desire to stabilize a fraught situation by making, once and for all, the difference between 'us' and 'them' and thereby 'our' own identity apart from theirs as palpable as possible. Of course this process demands simultaneously a denial of the presence of those others already within the nation's borders and a fixing of them with the meaning of their otherness. In the terror over immigration, as in the terror over terror, the others to whose presence the discursive panic affixes meanings – Arabs and Mexicans in this instance – fail to materialize as human presences at all. This has the reassuring consequence of denying that 'we' have any relationship to 'them', their predicaments, or their grievances at all. There is certainly an ethics and a politics to these visceral reactions.

The codifications of national security have forged an odd identity between these two radically disparate peoples: Mexicans, who not only in the south west but every where in America are identified as a threat to American labor and livelihoods, and Arabs, who whether they remain in the Middle East or immigrate to Paris, London, or Detroit represent a threat to American values and lives. In the American psyche especially, the anxieties associated with these groups involve the problem of presence and its dialectical tension with meanings that distance presence from us. Here presence and meaning seem insidiously associated so that the signifier 'Mexican' encompasses and confuses distinctions among documented and undocumented workers and U. S. citizens of Mexican birth or descent. For Arabs the categorical force of the signifier makes the differences of actual Arabs present in the world more difficult to discern. Consider the crimes committed in Darfur as an example of how the signifier 'Arab' tends to operate today. Little

of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1-27; B. Franklin, *The Interests of Great Britain Considered with Regards to her Colonies […] to which are added, Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, etc.* (London and Boston: B. Mecom, 1760); Th. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. F. Shuffelton (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 91.

[9] Even this, of course, was not wholly new in American discourse which has associated various forms of civil strife and terrorist violence with immigrants groups ranging including Irish workers, Italian anarchists, and an array of communist infiltrators from foreign lands.

explanation of the horrific events there seems necessary for the U. S. media other than to label the murderous Janjaweet as Arabs. The word Arab functions here less to offer a useful description of the Bagarra Camel herders who commit atrocities in water-starved Sudan than to link them with Arabs in the Levant, especially Palestinians, whose struggles against long decades of Western meddling and Israeli oppression have sometimes deployed terrorism as a weapon. It links them as well with those Arab Americans living in Lackawana or Detroit or in 'any town' U.S.A. who form, in the collective American imagination and often on the nightly news, a nightmarish network of sleeper cells capable at any moment of wrecking terror in the heartland. The murderous raids of the Camel herders on the farming villages of Sudan become another example of the murderous behavior of Arabs against their neighbors and an object lesson in why 'we' must win the global war on terror. The civil war in Iraq, the bloody aftermath of Sadam's dictatorship and the U. S. invasion, offers more evidence. Arabs cannot even refrain from killing each other. That these Arabs, representatives of a culture that seems resolutely foreign to the West, the last holdouts against the beneficent values of democratic modernism, Islamo fascists, tribal killers of daughters and wives, religious fanatics, should somehow become linked with those who come from a neighboring country to pick fruit, work in factories and restaurants, clean houses and assume myriad necessary burdens that make modernity – as the U. S. knows it – possible still seems surprising. Both groups in the U. S. could in fact be seen as brilliant examples of assimilation and each has produced a fair number of quite reputable public figures ranging from Governor Richardson to John Sununu. But Arabs and Mexicans have come to share an identity in the American imaginary as unassimilable others whose presence within the nation's borders threatens not only the nation's security but its very identity. It should not seem paradoxical to say that in this presentation of Arabs and Mexicans, Arabs and Mexicans remain largely absent, dematerialized by the geo-political significance ascribed to them, like the woman and children in the news photo above.

In all this anxious discourse about these groups, specific representations of Arabs and Mexicans make themselves felt. Arabs have religious and familial beliefs and structures that, defenders of the West like Bernard Lewis say, are fundamentally at odds with Western values. Mexicans, champions of American identity like Samuel Huntington claim, lack the Protestant work ethic and the ability to acculturate and therefore pose a serious threat to America's very character. Inexorably in these discourses about the nation's security, Arabs and Mexicans begin to look alike as representatives of pure otherness. Whatever the homeland means, its security requires that these others need to be kept or cast out. Their presence threatens the nation's existence and values. Remember how quickly explanation for the attacks in New York and Washington boiled down to the simple assertion that 'they' hate 'our' 'values'. Arabs and Mexicans, however hard many of them may work and however much many of them may succeed, hate our values too. But pure otherness is actually no presence at all. It is in the very nature of this very one sided debate about national security, despite all the thrills and

intensities it may possess for 'white' Americans, that Arabs and Mexicans may not feel present in it at all. Can these significantly absent immigrants be made present in a way that might positively transform the nation's sense of its domestic state and its own presence in the world? In considering this question the presence of immigrants, the problem of security, and the value and limits of feeling begin to come into view.

V. PRESENCE LIMITED

There is, in the remarkable confusion between Mexicans and Arabs, a lot a cultural critic could work with. The technique of demystification bequeathed to criticism by the Frankfurt School and designed to strip the masks of deception from the face of human suffering, to make that suffering present to the imagination, still have purchase in a world where the systematic distortion of significance still holds sway. U. S. popular culture at this moment sometimes seems, in ways Adorno could never have appreciated, prescient in this regard.

Consider, an American film starring the comic character Larry the Cable Guy, which appeared during one of the frequent fever spikes in U. S. anxieties about immigration. While pundits and politicians debated the wisdom and practicality of constructing a wall between Texas and Mexico, *Delta Farce* (2007) played briefly in suburban multiplexes and found its place in the rental market. A synopsis of this very funny thoroughly modest film suggests its relevance for the question of presence and sympathy, meaning and immigration. A group of alienated national guardsmen in the deep south looking forward to a weekend of what passes with these slackers as training – watching porn and eating chicken wings – suddenly find themselves called up to be shipped out to Iraq. On the way, however, the armored personnel carrier in which they are all sleeping falls out of the airplane and lands in the dessert outside of a small Mexican town that is beset by bandits. Larry and his two companions wake up and, believing they actually are in Iraq (to an American, Mexicans and Arabs do look alike), successfully 'liberate' the village. They do discover their error about halfway through the film, but by that time they have learned to love the people among whom they find themselves and, overcoming their own alienation, manage to humanize both themselves and the militarized American culture they represent. In this fantasy film, the troops do come home to resume their 'normal' lives having exhibited honor, compassion, and courage, and having created, on however small a scale, a real cross border trans-national community.

A cultural critic might do a lot with this film, analyzing, for example, what it reveals and what it hides about representations of Mexico, about American imperialism, about attitudes towards Arabs, about images of working class Americans, the military, official policy, popular culture, and alienation. I would note that I was surprised at how subversively sly and sympathetically progressive on issues of sexuality and race the film seemed. The Mexicans in the film, and

oddly enough even the Arabs in Iraq who never actually appear in the frame, seem more present to the viewer and more sympathetically accessible than news stories and border walls seem to allow. If one of the dreams of sympathetic art – like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – imagines spreading the ethos of niceness by making more people feel the presence of others and wish to feel right about their relation to them, then this film succeeds quite well[10].

But now I must confess a weariness of my own, not with meaning but with the longing in contemporary culture and criticism for this ethos of niceness and right feeling. Right feeling, moments of sympathetic identification or imaginary fellowship, however necessary they are to the continuation of human communities, have terrible limitations in their purchase on the world. It required a horrifying civil war and over a century of frequently violent struggle and enforced legislation and litigation for the United States to begin to redress the evils of a racial caste system Stowe attempted to make her readers feel. Mexican immigrants continue to suffer exploitation in the work place, Arabs remain prominent victims of civil and human rights abuses. Meanwhile, even the President can sound like an advocate for cross cultural understanding and mutual respect. More than sentiment and sympathy, more even than intense moments of felt presence, seem to be required.

To return to the beginning point of this essay: one legacy of 9/11 has been the radical reification of an identity logic in U. S. foreign and domestic policy, an intensified rigidity in American attitudes toward immigrants and the world, that have always been one component of American ideological life. This, interestingly, takes two opposed forms based on appeals to either brusque exclusivity (equating immigrants and terrorists as threats to national security) or hospitable openness (attempts to bridge borders and understand others)[11]. In its nativist or conservative form, this cultural and state politics demands exclusion and control and the priority of 'our' rights to privilege or defense. In its progressive or cosmopolitan form this cultural and state politics would (it doesn't presently exist, I think, except as sentiment) work toward inclusion and identification and the painful calculations of justice for those whose presence among us demands that we rethink material questions of equity, the nature of identity, and the need for security in a complicated and threatening world. I am deeply committed to the later, but I wonder – as all before the awful bar of justice must – where a commitment to right will take us and to what extent the attractive appeals of sympathy will prove

[10] Gumbrecht himself remarks that novels and films, even those usually thought of as debased, might create complex effects of 'presentification' as notable as those in great art (123).

[11] In much simpler terms than Nancy's, the opposition posed here relates to the distinction he makes between globalization as a discourse of the world as one finds it – a sophistry of policy as Stowe might have put it – and mondialization or the creation of the world meaning «immediately, without delay, reopening each possible struggle for a world, that is, for what must form the contrary of a global injustice against the background of general equivalence»: *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. F. Raffoul and D. Pettigrew (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2007), 54. In this particular work, Nancy equates this struggle with justice and meaning and I take his point here as my point of departure to consider what the struggle with or for justice might actually mean.

inadequate to the material requirements of the still incompletely realized other's presence among us.

Of one thing I am sure, really attempting to do justice to the other will take us beyond both the discourses of meaning and presence that, Gumbrecht correctly notes, tend to occupy professional humanists. Agamben reminds us that instituting justice and respecting rights entail the same mechanisms of state sovereignty and legislative policy that can and do create injustices and violate rights. This has led some critics to imagine that state power and juridical discourses can play only an oppressive part in global politics[12]. Yet, sentimentalizing the other, even feeling for the other, may fail to redress the miseries of dislocation and oppression, unless the other can be made present in a realm somewhat distant from the humanist's more familiar aesthetic concerns.

To truly alter the immigrant's place in the world may require admitting the other as a presence not so much in our hearts and homes as before the lawful procedures and protections of empowered institutions devoted to human rights in principle and in practice. Those rights include freedom from search, seizure, and torture, and freedom to organize, to earn a decent wage, and to bargain with management.

For one of the reasons that Arabs and Mexicans look alike is that American policies at home and abroad reduce both to that state of exception Agamben defines as being beyond both law and community. Immigrants are threatened with the status of peoples whose sufferings and deaths can be given neither moral nor legal meaning, existing within society but separated from society's laws or feelings, incapable of being murdered or sacrificed but dying none the less. This is an odd and tragic dynamic that permits presence but paradoxically only under the sign – or within the barrier of – exclusion. Agamben familiarizes us with the complex implications of sovereignty, law, and modernity in an increasingly normalized state of exception, and reminds us of one real reason that Arabs and Mexicans might make us feel afraid. They provoke terror not for the damage they may do to us but for the fact that in a world where states of exception become the norm, we, like they, might find ourselves naked before state power and common indifference, confined by the barriers of civil exclusions and erased as human subjects, but present as suffering bodies clutching a few objects we can never really call possessions.

A possible remedy for this terror entails more than a demand for more present feeling regarding one's ethical burden with regard to the other. It requires more importantly that we make these others more present as participants in the meaningful discourses and deliberations of the state. One of the ways in which we might recognize and attend to Arabs and Mexicans and so many others at home

[12] I refer, of course, to Agamben's widely influential analysis in *Homer Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) and *States of Exception*, trans. K. Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For a communitarian critique of liberal ideas of justice and the state see, M. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

and in the world would be not to fixate on the fascinations of their identities (which are for those of us interested in art, culture, food and other forms of present difference fascinating indeed) but to render each of them present to the law – if any true lawfulness remains – and empowered by the law in their negotiations with capital and the state – if the capacity of any true governance has not been fatally compromised. While this doesn't sound like an especially libratory project, and while it poses complexities of boundaries and justice, belonging and identity of its own, it might be an economic and political strategy that could begin to construct our economic and ethical debts in ways that might get paid. Those lawyers and activists who are exploring ideas of transnational citizenship for workers moving between the Middle East and Europe and between Mexico and the United States work beyond sympathy and aesthetics, beyond what professional humanists – whether they fixate on meaning or presence – usually do, to address and empower the other's existence as a legal subject in a lawful world[13].

As agents within not beyond the law, Mexicans and Arabs – however different their cases may be – might both still look alike, but they would look more like those of us still able to assume (though we may be wrong) that we are protected by a form of belonging that allows us to be present before the law and that protects us (we hope) from the most brutal forms of oppression and expropriation. Whether that assumption is tenable or that hope forlorn requires further discussion among an 'us' that includes the presence of all interested parties. The outcome of that discussion, should it occur, will depend in large part on the specific states of exception – exceptions to full lawful presence or justice – that we allow ourselves to be terrified into accepting.

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[13] This work moves from philosophy and literature to the practical realm of jurisprudence. See, for example, Jennifer Gordon's lawyerly and activist attempt to conceptualize citizenship not limited to national borders in «Transnational Labor Citizenship», *Southern California Law Review*, 80, 3 (March 2007): 503-587.