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Words For A Warrior

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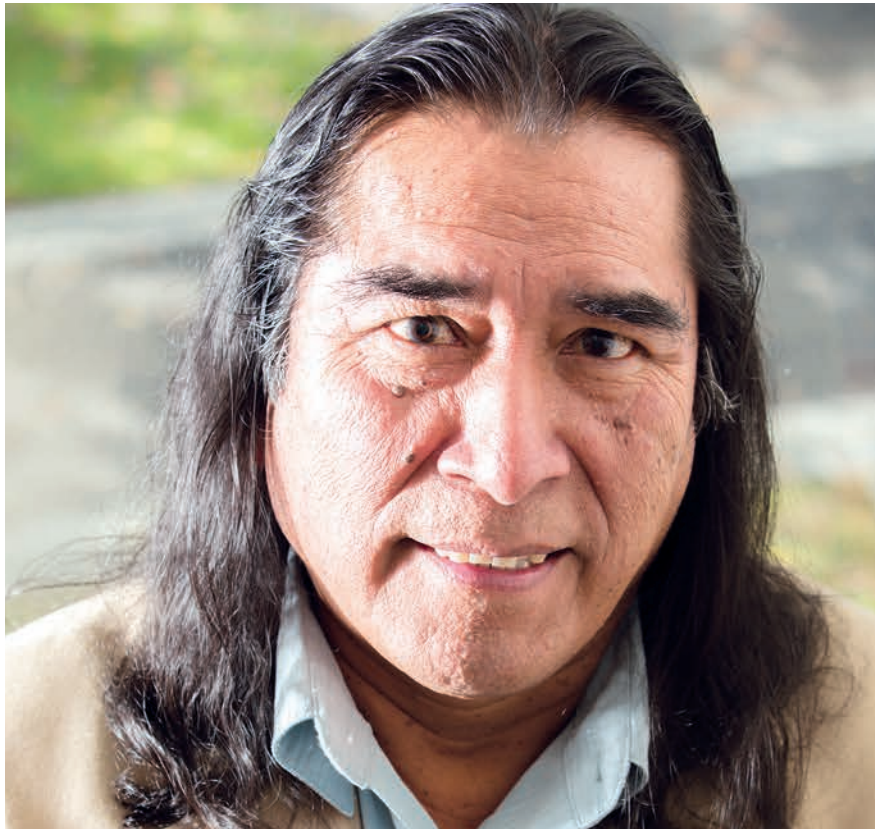
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LAURENCE KESTERSON

WORDS FOR A WARRIOR

BORN IN PERU, BRAULIO MUÑOZ is the College's Centennial Professor of Sociology as well as a successful novelist who has been published around the world in English, Spanish, and Italian. Even when it seems as if humanity is more fractious and fraught than ever, he maintains that art has the power to unite, elevate, and even save us. Here, he explains why to *Bulletin* editor Jonathan Riggs.

How does art connect people within and across all cultures?

Art is a window into human communality as well as differences. Through the beauty of African masks, Peruvian *huaco* pottery, or the different *Les Femmes d'Alger*, we come closer to the people who produced it. Art helps

us overcome our preconceived ways of seeing, hearing, tasting, and touching—even of understanding our place in the cosmos. In an increasingly disenchanting world, art nurtures the sacred found in all cultures.

What lines can you trace through your own art?

I believe I have been writing the same book all my life. My work is a halting dance around a set of questions: How do we make sense of the strictures and freedoms which contemporary life gives us? What happens when, because of forced or chosen exile, we come to lose our moral compass? How complex are our shifting identities and how fragile? What is the price paid for allaying our fears by embracing ever-new identities?

Who are some of your favorite artists whose work epitomizes what it means to navigate—or even create—what it means to be American?

Juan Felipe Herrera, poet laureate of America: a teacher/poet child of

migrant farmers, and Cesária Évora, a Cape Verdean singer who used to perform shoeless. Her song “*Sodade*” touches the heart of those among us who seek a future in a new land while never forgetting what we have left behind.

Which literary characters have influenced you the most?

Moncada, a crazy black man who appears in José María Arguedas's last novel, *The Fox from Up Above and the Fox from Down Below*. Moncada is a truth-teller who connects us to the Andean notion of the *upa*—someone who speaks truth to power in riddles or in silence—and to the Western concept of logos.

Sherlock Holmes, whom I read of when I was a child discovering Peru. It helped me focus on the minutia of the world at a time when the sky that had held for me the map of all possible paths was dimming.

Frédéric Moreau, of Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*. I read it in Paris when I was still an impetuous young man who allowed himself to feel the lure of turbulent feelings amid social turmoil.

How has a Swarthmore student inspired you with his or her own art?

A few years back, I met Haydil Henriquez '14, an impressive Latina student with a deep and sweet voice. She was sitting on our department lobby's sofa, looking inward. To lift her spirits, I said to her: “I love your voice. Don't lose it.” With her eyes, she told me she had understood the double meaning of my words.

A couple of years later, Haydil read one of her poems as part of the welcoming ceremony for incoming Latino students.

Near the end of it, she writes:

*You looked at me with gleaming eyes
And I swear I was transported into
the ancient times
Before all our lands were colonized
And you were a medicine man
With the words for a warrior ...”*

A most precious gift. I will cherish it until I can no longer write my book. ⑤