In the window of my third story office in the Bilingual Creative Writing program at University of Texas-El Paso (UTEP), the sun falls over the desert mountains, over one of the poorest barrios of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico’s fifth largest city. Cement shacks and unpaved roads rise like scars up and down the barren hills. A rickety bus passes on the horizon, dust filling the air, a pinkish orange film over the landscape. On the top of the tallest mountain, not even a mile away from where I stand at my office window, a cross appears in silhouette against the brilliant orange sky.

Should I marvel at the beauty or lament the poverty?

Every day I see such economic inequality.

The poor live in substandard housing right across from the university—across the freeway and across the dried up Rio Grande/Rio Bravo. Everyday as I stand at my window and remember who I am, a Xican@ (Chicano/a) writer, and I am reminded every day what that means to my esthetic. How can I forget poverty and racism? How can I forget my grandmother’s backyard facing the alley of stray dogs and homeless drunks? Yet, as an artist, how can I not swoon—even when in self-parody—at the burnt colors in the sky?

Rasquache is the combination of the ugly and the beautiful, the celebration and lamentation of disharmony, of contradictions, of the way many Mexicans live. In the CARA exhibit¹, rasquache was everywhere, clashing colors, images of everyday Xican@ people and their surroundings. Rasquache finds beauty in my grandmother’s backyard, the old Folgers coffee cans used to grow red and yellow flowers, the gutted rubber tires turned into planters for herbs, the hole in the yard where abuelita buried the

¹ CARA was the first Chicano/a art exhibit to tour mainstream museums throughout the United States. CARA stands for Chicano Art, Resistance and Affirmation. This exhibit placed much of the ideology of the Chicano/a Movement into images and put them under the bright lights of haute culture. Whether this strengthened the voice of the poor and oppressed or trivialized their politics is arguable, but the exhibit itself is inarguably one of the most important events in the history of Chicano/a art.
clothes that belonged to the dead husband who beat her. Rasquache is an artistic sensibility that affirms the power of the Chicano/a people, la gente. It resists the all too familiar refrain of which the Chicana poet Lorna Dee Cervantes writes, “that constant nagging that I’m not good enough.” Rasquache is an aesthetic that releases the despairing shout, el grito, of the Chicano/Mexicano on the border. Rasquache recognizes the power in ugly-beautiful.

_Bordersenses_, a litmag started by former graduate students in the bilingual MFA program at UTEP, is rasquache.

Readers who may not understand this sensibility might assess the journal to be amateurish, lowbrow art, not because there is a lack of good writing—there is excellent writing—but because side by side with the published and the reputable are la gente, the people, like those who live in the shacks across the river from my office window. _Bordersenses_ is not a Xican@ journal, per se: it takes submissions in English or Spanish from anywhere, from anyone, but most of the pages haven been written by local El Paso/Juarez writers, and most people in this area are Mexicanos. However, the Spanish surnames in the table of contents are not what make the journal rasquache. _Bordersenses_ includes within its pages writers with multiple publications like Benjamín Alire Saenz and young writers who had never before published and many who will probably never publish again.

In Volume 4, a poem appears called “Eyes of Obsidian”:

Through the shadows I see your eyes  
Glitter ominously in the moonlight  
You set your lips tight to  
Choke back your tortured screams.

One with a learned poetic sensibility might find weakness in a poem with descriptions like “Glitter ominously” and “tortured screams.” Even the fact that each line starts with a capital letter shows that using Microsoft Word has influenced the rhythm of the poem.

Albeit, “shadow in the eyes” is a beautiful image, and perhaps if Warren explores such imagery, she could be onto something real; but the poem is not that sophisticated.

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2 Unless of course they see the Sunday funnies and submit to the National Congress of Poetry and pay fifty dollars for their copy of the handsome leather-bound anthology. Sometimes students applying for MFA programs and even teachers applying to teach in them list those kinds of publications, ignorant as to what they’re really saying about themselves.

3 I hope the meaning of this is clear. When I type in poems by Neruda or Pound to show to my students, I’m irritated that the computer capitalizes each new line, as if correcting the poets. And when students turn in poems with capital letters on every line, I’m irritated that they would let Microsoft influence their esthetic.
She would not get published in most litmags, if any. She’s fourteen years old.

Between the same pages is a poem called “Fire” by Benjamín Alire Saenz, one of the border’s most important literary representatives.

... An empty street
is full to a man who is ready for
the dance....
... Tango, Cumbia, Rhumba. Tap, tap
on the concrete that a million fathers poured.

The poem is powerful in its use of language, image and theme, but none of those variables draw enough attention to themselves to pull the reader from the experience, that is, the dream of the poem. In other words, Saenz is a fine poet. He has three books of poetry, and his latest, *Elegies in Blue* (Cinco Puntos Press), has just been released. The image he evokes with a “million fathers” shows a sophisticated social awareness and more: it connects the land to those who worked it.

In essence, putting experienced poets such as Saenz, Virgil Suarez (author of several books), Alejandrina Drew (*Abra Cababra, Patas de Cabra*, Eakan Press), side by side with less experienced poets is rasquache, that which makes *Bordersenses* a beautiful and important journal. The values that influence its esthetics come NOT from above, but from below, from the earth, from the people; not from the universities and the future canon makers, not from the present literary elite, but from the values of la Linea, the border, where Mexican workers wait for hours to cross to the U.S. side so they can work minimum wage jobs. Where some of the world’s most brilliant sunsets light up like a halo over poverty and despair.

A common belief in MFA programs is that getting published too early can hurt a writer. How many professors have warned their talented students about this? Yet this axiom may not be as true as we have to come to accept it to be, at least not for most of the world. A single work appearing in a litmag or a first or second book does not represent the writer as a whole, but the development of a writer. Neruda published his first book, *Crespéculo*, at nineteen years old. We can go back to those early poems and see examples of amateurish writing, but we can also see the

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4 I put him up there with the El Paso/Border greats: Burciaga, Islas, Gilb, Chavez, Sanchez, Mora. Saenz’s two novels, *Carry Me like Water* (Harper-Collins) and *The House of Forgetting* (Harper-Collins) are set in las ciudades gemelas, El Paso/Juarez, as are most of his poems and stories. One time at a poetry reading for his new book, *Elegies in Blue* (Cinco Puntos Press), he stood at the podium and sighed, as if breathing in the fragrance of a good wine. “I love El Paso,” he said. “I would never want to live anywhere else.”
emergence of his genius. *Bordersenses*, in reflecting the community, creates space for developing artists, a place to begin.

Michael Alvarez, a twenty-one-year-old poet in El Paso, will years later say that he started with *Bordersenses*. He writes in "Rain Memoir":

> It breaks the gray of wet benches in the park where one is waiting for a hand to hold.  
> It breaks the gray like morning breaks the dream.  
> It breaks the scabs of time, it breaks the now.  
> It blurs the brow with sadness once brought on by beads of moon, of star, of stone, of moss.

His sense of rhythm is clearly strong, and he often uses imagery that is abstract-concrete. He’s a poet whose instincts cannot be taught or contained. Here’s a poem from an earlier issue (Volume 5) that Alvarez wrote when he was nineteen years old:

> in saxophone notes out of the blue  
> breathing the blue, weeping the blue,  
> playing wailing feeling the blue  
> he is  
> the blue.

He’s got passion, rhythm, and his sense of imagery leads him to true metaphor.

Another writer who will no doubt go on to publish good books is the Mexican poet Gabriel Aguirre Sanchez. She lives in El Paso. Only twenty-five, she has just come out with her first book in Mexico, but this is one of her first publications in a U.S. litmag:

> En unas horas se hace el desierto  
> las voces de los autos  
> las carreteras  
> las avenidas que he trazado en los cristales  
> de una habitación de seis ventanas.

Amit Ghosh is the publisher and Rubi Orozco the editor of *Bordersenses*. Two earlier founders and editors of the journal dropped out for personal reasons, so Ghosh and Orozco make decisions together. What they may seem to risk in having the journal reflect the community, and in publishing those who may become well-known poets in the future, is the inclusion within the pages of some *not so great* poems, some writing that
doesn’t seem to work very well: that is, amateurish writing. I’m referring to what we call in the workshop Hallmark-card poetry. Sometimes students of Hallmark poetry are surprised that we don’t “like” their work, because when their mothers read the same poem, they cried. *Bordersenses* includes the occasional Hallmark poem.

However, such editorial inclusiveness is not the weakness of *Bordersenses*, but its strength. When I see Hallmarksque poems in its pages, I don’t see bad poems. I see mothers crying. This is the border, this is where Mexican culture lives side by side with Chicano culture, so the mother I see is a morena like my abuelita. To imagine her crying because her daughter or son wrote a poem—one that got published!—I find very beautiful. That’s what a community-based literary journal should do. Too many litmags do not reflect the value of their region, but reflect the values of their literary community, which comes from behind the walls of the university. A litmag from Alaska will have the same esthetic values as one from Minnesota, and they may vie for the same talent, published writers from anywhere. Meanwhile, the Aleut and the Sioux can’t get their stuff published in locally produced pages because their work doesn’t reflect the sophisticated literary standard.

Even if it *does* make the elders cry.

Such juxtaposition with the good and the not so good, the experienced and the not so experienced, the educated and the not so educated is beautiful, like flowers blooming in a rusted coffee can.

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5 I mean, *I Do*, but I don’t.

6 There are of course exceptions to this, in California *ZYZZYVA* and *In the Grove* are good examples of litmags that represent the region, even if it includes the not-so-honed work of new regional writers.