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## Special Focus Introduction: Bodies, Transnationalism and Affect in Recent Hispanic Poetry

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## Special Focus Introduction: Bodies, Transnationalism and Affect in Recent Hispanic Poetry

### Abstract

Introduction to special focus section: *Bodies, Transnationalism and Affect in Recent Hispanic Poetry*.

### Keywords

Spanish poetry, affect theory, bodies, transnationalism

Special Focus Introduction:  
Bodies, Transnationalism and Affect in Recent Hispanic Poetry

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In a recent interview, Spanish contemporary poet and literary critic Miguel Casado defends a practical disposition in all kinds of poetic expression. For Casado, poetry constitutes a type of writing that not only provides useful information as a way of being-in-the-world but also reclaims the world as (a) property of the self. He maintains that the beauty of a poem resides not in what it says or how it says it but in what it does. From this angle, Casado speaks of poetic writing as the effect of a “stimulus” or a “source of energy” rooted in the poet’s ability to express (and therefore intervene in) the potential transformation of the collective (Peñas). *Bodies, Transnationalism and Affect in Recent Hispanic Poetry* explores a similar process of poetic writing in a transnational context. Indeed, the five essays gathered here show how recent Hispanic poets question the social while refusing easy answers to questions of belonging, identity, and the constitution of bodies and/or subject positions as determined by movements across national boundaries.

The 2018 Presidential Theme for the MLA Convention in New York City, “#States of Insecurity,” provided the point of departure for this special focus section in *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature*. On that occasion, Diana Taylor invited reflections on how “work in the humanities offers strategies for navigating the crises of our time.” In particular, “#States of Insecurity” asked “those in the academy to draw from their experiences to identify and denaturalize the elements that contribute to states of insecurity” (Taylor). My response to Dr. Taylor’s call was to organize a panel that, bearing the same title as this special focus section, would address questions such as the following: How do we feel about belonging in an increasingly globalized world? How does one fathom one’s own body in relationship to *another*, including non-human or more than human others? What are the aesthetic counterparts to the excesses of current neoliberal politics? In the panel, we explored possible answers to these questions, taking as our object of study contemporary experiences of displacement (both physical and emotional), sociopolitical survival, and environmental degradation as articulated in recent Hispanic poetic form. These essays build on this preliminary discussion, interrogating the relationship between the three main parameters of critical inquiry within recent Hispanic poetic practice —bodies, transnationalism and affect.

The materiality of the body in literary representation has been particularly difficult to grasp. In their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, David Hillman and Ulrika Maude provide a compelling summary to the variety of ways in which the body has been theorized and used in literary

studies. Hillman and Maude indicate that the body can be represented in literary texts and “can itself be ‘written’—marked and changed by ideological and socio-historical forces” (2). This last premise, the writerly and transformational undertakings of bodies under specific socio-historical contexts, informs this editorial endeavor towards bodily conditions of experience as inscribed in poetic form. Indeed, as these critics make clear, “in confronting us with the legible materiality of the body, literature often provides powerful forms of resistance to socially instituted perceptions and demands . . . the literary field constitutes a challenge to the disciplining of embodied discourse and affect” (4). From this angle, Hillman and Maude conclude that “the body in literature is the locus of socio-political resistance” (6).

In his monumental work on *The Production of Space* (2000 [1974]), Henry Lefebvre poses the body as the first scale of social relations and, as such, as a legitimate site of resistance and ideological contestation. He forcefully argues that social space, as the space produced through social interaction, constitutes some kind of texture that implies meaning not for a neutral ‘reader’ but “for someone who lives and acts in the space under consideration, a ‘subject’ with a body—or sometimes a ‘collective subject’” (132). Lefebvre completes this idea later in his argument when he claims that, “it is by means of the body that space is perceived, lived—and produced” (162). As I have argued elsewhere (Álvarez 138), I take the question of poetic form, a foundational premise of poetics, as a textual space that is both produced and transformed by the spatial triad designed by Lefebvre: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces (33). As such, and moving beyond stock approaches to the body as determined by notions of gender and sexuality, for example, the papers gathered here address the body as a cultural site where the potential transformation of the social might take place. Indeed, as these essays demonstrate, thematic understandings of the body in recent Hispanic (and Hispanic related) poetry consider a variety of embodied modalities and transformational experiences, like the use of language (del Pliego, López Martín and Álvarez and Hernández), sensory and sensitive perceptions and reactions (Varón, Bezhanova, Álvarez and Hernández), corporeal movement and reorientation (Álvarez and Hernández), and cultural and geographical subjective positionings (Álvarez and Hernández, Bezhanova and López Martín). All contributions contextualize their arguments about embodied experiences of poetic expression within a transnational setting.

Scholars in transnational studies have sought to explain their field of inquiry by establishing a stark contrast with processes of social and cultural globalization in terms of scale. Generalized approaches to the global emphasize a spatial paradigm that would encompass all kinds of movements beyond the political borders of nation-states. However, the distinctiveness of transnational scholarship has focused on crossings of national boundaries as determined by specific levels of

gradation and dissemination. For example, Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz makes clear that globalization denotes “any process or relationship that crosses state boundaries that extend across the world,” whereas the term “transnational” constitutes a cluster of similar “phenomena which can be of quite variable scale and distribution” (qtd. in Khagram and Levitt 3). All papers included here share a similar understanding of transnationalism, as they establish specific modes of differentiation contained by analogous processes of boundary crossings among and between Hispanic cultures (del Pliego, Varón) or within different Iberian cultures and post-colonial action-groups circumscribed within the Spanish nation-state (Bezhanova, López Martín, Álvarez and Hernández).

A grounding theoretical hypothesis in transnational studies proposes the application to cultural analysis of “an optic or gaze that begins with a world without borders, empirically examines the boundaries and borders that emerge at particular historical moments, and explores their relationships to unbounded arenas and processes” (Khagram and Levitt 5). This premise has also become the working proposition that informed my initial interest in the topic of transnational poetics across Hispanic and Iberian cultures. The essays gathered here address embodied experiences of migration and of the relocation of human and cultural capital (del Pliego, Varón, Álvarez and Hernández), of decolonization (López Martín), and of the social crisis brought about by the indiscriminate implementation of neoliberal economic policies across nation-states (Bezhanova). All these essays interrogate and disturb the epistemological fixity of political and cultural boundaries as articulated in poetic form.

The unboundedness of corporeal experiences brought to the forefront of critical inquiry by the application of the transnational perspective fits nicely with Jo Labanyi’s influential call to scholars in Hispanic studies to pay attention to feeling and emotion in Hispanic cultural practices. For example, Labanyi defends a concept subjectivity,

based on relationships with others and with things. That means paying attention to feelings as well as ideas, and viewing feelings, not as property of the self, but as produced through the interaction between self and world. And it means seeing that interaction, not as coming together of two separate entities, but as a process of entanglement in which boundaries do not hold. (223)

Labanyi’s invitation to consider processes of emotional entanglements between self and world as constitutive elements of subjectivity brings into focus an evaluation of affects and emotions as the last component of my methodological triad in the study of recent Hispanic poetry. To this end, I would like to return to Casado’s approach to poetic writing as the effect of a “stimulus” or “source of energy.”

Casado's location of the synergies between self and world at the root of poetics reminds us of current theoretical approaches to affect as the preconscious impact of the world on the body. From this perspective, the extent of the affective field as an analytical tool as implied in the title of this special focus section refers to its transformational potential. That is, "as the body's *capacity* to affect and be affected" (Seigworth and Gregg 2).

However, current methodological approaches to affect, emotion, feeling and thought have sought to establish theoretical distinctions among these terms, arguing that they occupy different temporalities in the cognitive process (Delgado, Fernández and Labanyi 5-6). Moreover, we should consider that, although semantically related, the Spanish *afecto* 'affect' and *emoción* 'emotion' do not completely correspond to their meaning in English. As Labanyi explains, "in Spanish 'afecto' remains equivalent to 'sentimiento' (emotion)," whereas "the Spanish 'emoción' comes closer to what is meant by 'affect' in its restricted English sense . . . that is, as a strong response to a stimulus" (224).

In order to avoid the Spanish/English translation impasse and a lengthy discussion on the theoretical differences between affects, emotions and feelings, (an examination that would exceed the word limit for this introduction), I will turn the focus of my argument to Sara Ahmed's 2004 influential take on *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Ahmed makes clear that she's more interested in knowing what emotions *do* than to know exactly what emotions *are* (*The Cultural* 4). Therefore, Ahmed speaks of "affective economies," in which "feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation . . . The circulation of objects allows us to think about the 'sociality' of emotion" (8). Once again, I shall recall here Casado's pertinent approach to the aesthetic value of the poem dwelling on its affective capacities, thereby privileging an understanding of what the poetic text actually does once it circulates among and between communities of readers. Ahmed also speaks of "the emotionality of texts" as "the way in which texts name or perform different emotions" (*The Cultural* 13). Textual emotionality determines the affective capability of writing by stressing the outcomes of speech itself. As Ahmed explains, "the feeling does simply exist before the utterance, but becomes 'real' as an effect, shaping different kinds of actions and orientations . . . As such emotions are performative . . . and they involve speech acts . . . which depend on past histories, at the same time as they generate effects" (*The Cultural* 13).

The editorial team of a volume on the impact of emotions in Spanish culture and history argues that, "the fact that emotions are performative—addressed to an audience—allows them to construct 'emotional communities' founded on common values and desires . . . In this sense, emotions have a social and socializing function" (Delgado, Fernández and Labanyi 4). The interpellation of social groups through emotional performances in poetic expression is of particular relevance in all of the essays included here. Linguistic hybridity as well as networks of socialization at

the local scale, like the family and the neighborhood, have traditionally provided an emotional safety net for Hispanic communities in the United States. As such, these topics are being systematically addressed in US Latino/a cultural practices and they constitute the stock arguments privileged by US Latino/a scholars. Oddly, as del Pliego argues in his paper, this situation has prevented Hispanic poets in the US who choose to write in Spanish to be recognized as creative contributors towards the development of poetics in the US contemporary literary cannon. Although examining a different sociocultural context, Bezhanova's and López Martín's essays show how social reactions to the economic crises of 2008 produced emotionally defined communities and action groups that were able to translate the political into structures of feeling articulated in poetic form. Bezhanova focuses her analysis on peninsular outraged poetics as a response to indiscriminate flows of neoliberal economic policies flowing across European national boundaries. López Martín looks at the poetics of friendship as a decolonizing strategy implemented by Hispanophone Sahrawi poets in dialogue with their counterparts across the sea in the Canary Islands. Likewise, Varón explores urban alienation as a material condition of experience felt by rural Spanish youths forced to leave familiar environments in search of work. Alienation serves not only as a tool to exhumate migrant labor but emotional attachments to the rural as an alternative social imaginary. Although from a very different experience of the social, the poetry of the Basque author and cultural activist Kirmen Uribe goes beyond the realm of metaphor into what Hernández and I call the "affective functionality" of his poetic expression. Through a corporeal gesture that seeks to reach the other, Uribe's poetry reorients towards loving coexistence a community emotionally saturated and politically divided after decades of state-sponsored institutional violence and bloody terrorists' responses.

In this special focus section, the contributions examine the intersection between the body, transnationalism, and affect in a variety of contexts, ranging from Hispanic poetry in the US context to poetry as protest in twentieth-century Spain. **Benito del Pliego's** paper addresses the linguistic marginalization experienced by poets coming from Hispanic cultural backgrounds in the US who choose to write in Spanish. Del Pliego forcefully argues that these authors' work has been systematically undervalued or forgotten altogether within the circuit of national recognitions and literary prizes, and in editorial projects that seek to provide an account of aesthetic developments in contemporary US poetry. Rather than focusing on how Hispanic poets who write in the Spanish language dialogue with questions of poetics in creative and innovative ways, US institutional agencies and editorial houses stick to the traditional themes and representational formats that determine the life experience of Hispanic communities in the US. Among these, del Pliego names linguistic hybridity and networks of affective socialization such as the family and the neighborhood. The role of English and English-based hybrid or

interlingua manifestations such as *Spanglish* have been identified, celebrated and promoted as the preferred form of communication among Latino/a scholars in the US. Linguistic hybridity and stock motives in Latino/a studies have resulted in a marginalizing cultural trend as the effect of an artificial southern cultural border drawn between two points of reference: the adoption of English as the privileged linguistic code, and the concomitant, required presence of contents easily adjusted to the political struggles undertaken by the subaltern Hispanic population in the US. Del Pliego grounds his argument on two prominent concepts in Francophone studies, Jacques Derrida's "The Monolingualism of the Host" and Edouard Glissant's well-known concept of "creolization," in order to best explain how contemporary Hispanic poets in the US relate to (and strive to transform) literary traditions in a globalized world. From this angle, del Pliego argues that transnational crossings among and between poetic traditions should be taken into account as a significant transformational element of the US contemporary literary canon.

The next article in this special focus section, by **Olga Bezhanova**, examines the poetic production in relationship to the 15-M social movement in Spain. The severity of the economic policies implemented by the Spanish government in the country after the economic crisis of 2008, produced a series of anti-austerity protests in Spain around the 2011 general election. This election brought to power the right-wing *Partido Popular* 'The People's Party' under the leadership of Mariano Rajoy, ousted from government in 2018 after losing a no-confidence vote in the Spanish Parliament because of proven corruption charges in the higher Spanish Courts. On May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011 this new social movement known as the 15-M movement, or the *indignados* 'outraged' took over the streets and squares of several Spanish cities and transformed public space into an arena of collective creativity. In 2013 Alberto García Teresa gathered in *Dissidents, An Anthology of Critical Spanish Poetry* more than eighty names linked to the political ethos of the 15-M, as the outraged action group came to be known in Spain. Bezhanova's article takes *Dissidents* as an account of this crisis, focusing her analysis on the work of Daniel Macías Díaz and Antonio Rómar, two of García Teresa's anthologized poets. Bezhanova grounds her study on Zygmunt Bauman's understanding of late modernity as a "fluid stage" of social and economic relations. The fluid stage of modernity is produced as an effect the rhetoric of a malleable and mobile sense of self co-opted by neoliberal ideology in order to suit the needs of free-market, transnational capitalism. From this angle, she argues that the affective power of *Dissidents* legitimizes the discontent experienced by those who find it hard to embrace constant change, thus refusing the neoliberalist hold on economic and social relations. Alongside Ahmed's well-known theoretical approach to emotions "as social and cultural practices" (*The Cultural* 9), Bezhanova unveils the discursive mechanisms whereby outraged poetries transform the emotional

experiences of isolated individuals into a shared affective response that informs collective action. From this angle, her analysis grounds *Dissidents* on the belief that art embodies a cluster of sensations that stimulate thought. Following this line of reasoning, Bezhanova moves to Jonathan Flatley's concept of affective mapping to show, through a detailed close reading of Macias Díaz and Rómar texts, how spatial form in literature can determine an affective, textual environment where alternative subject positions to neoliberal politics can thrive.

From the perspective of recent Spanish migrant poetry, **Carlos Varón** offers a stimulating critique of transnational flows of (human) capital similar to those discussed by Bezhanova. Through his compelling analysis of the poetry of two younger poets, Fruela Fernández and Lara Dopazo Rubial, Varón provides a devastating evaluation of the "cosmopolitan hypothesis" that sought to sweep the increasing numbers of youth unemployment in Spain under the rug of a supposedly affective disposition of the younger generation towards entrepreneurship, transnational encounters, and new languages. He grounds this argument on Lauren Berlant's influential notion of "cruel optimism" as the identification with a narrative of the happy life that in practice becomes the impediment to its own realization. From this perspective, Varón unveils the hypocrisy of José Ignacio Wert, Rajoy's disastrous Secretary of Education in 2012, as Wert celebrated the ability of the Spanish youth to become entrepreneurs of the self when, in fact, they were forced to leave the country to look for work opportunities abroad. From this point of departure, Varón approaches the 2016 migrant poetry of Fernández and Dopazo as a process of "exhuming labor," a complex metaphor that connects the historical, the political and the social. Varón shows how Fernández and Dopazo reflect on the experience of migration that many young Spaniards had to undertake as a consequence of the 2008 recession. In their writing, migration goes hand in hand with a constellation of affective impulses. In particular, Varón argues that the poetry of Fernández and Dopazo pose alienation as a sort of emotional numbness that is both a response to but also conducive to social detachment and isolation. The emotions described and mobilized by these poets point towards thinking of globalization not only as an alternative to a class-blind cosmopolitanism but as particular processes of specific transnational crossings that involve the exhumation of migrant work and exile. In this sense, these emotions constitute affiliative acts that pose the rural not as nostalgia or pastoral existence, but as an alternative social imaginary.

**Alberto López Martín** examines in his essay the critical impact of the anthology *VerSahara* 'Looking at Sahara' in the Iberian cultural field. Following a well-known trend in recent Spanish Peninsular poetry, a group of Hispanophone Sahrawi poets established their own *Generación de la Amistad* 'Friendship Generation' in Madrid in 2005. Thereafter, Sahrawi poetry written in Spanish has found in the anthology an ideal format to present itself to the Spanish reader. These

collections of poetry were organized according to a double logic of literary activism and cultural preservation, an editorial move that emphasized the collective will in poetic expression. López Martín analyzes the cultural effects of such double logic that occurs in the anthology *VerSahara* 'Looking at Sahara' published in 2016. In this collection of poems, authors from the Canary Islands, one of the seventeen autonomous communities that encompass the Spanish State, and Sahrawi poets share pages and territorial concerns about the political conflict in Western Sahara, which has remained unresolved since the Moroccan occupation in 1975 of the former Spanish colony. López Martín's article focuses on the production and circulation of emotional attachments between Spanish and Sahrawi poets. Textual emotionality produces as well as transforms a discourse of transnational solidarity and human rights activism into a poetic space of representation and resistance to ultra-conservative ideologies of the nation based on the colonial notion of *Hispanidad* 'Spanishness.' From this angle, this critic explores the use of a communal "we" in Spanish as *lingua franca*, mixed in their writing with relevant expressions in *Hassaniya*, the native language of Sahrawi poets. Sahrawi poetic anthologies in general and *VerSahara* in particular attempt to consolidate an additional cultural front in the struggle for the recognition of self-determination in Western Sahara. They do so by interpellating the Spanish-speaking community while delving into textual emotional resources that converge in three rhetorical topoi: the Sahrawi people's resilience in the face of repeated Moroccan aggressions, the romanticizing of their nomadic past, and the linguistic and literary ties with Spain.

**Enrique Álvarez** and **Ester Hernández-Esteban** explore, in our essay in this collection, the contribution of Basque writer, artist and cultural activist Kirmen Uribe to the process of political reconciliation in the Basque country, a socially transforming compromise brought about by the dissolution of the Basque terrorist organization ETA on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Uribe achieved literary recognition and public notoriety within the Iberian cultural landscape with the publication of his first novel *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* in 2008, for which he received the Spanish National Literature Prize for Narrative in the following year. However, we argue that it is with his earlier collection of poems *Bistatean Heldu Eskutik* 'Meanwhile Take my Hand,' originally published in Euskara—the Basque language—in 2001, that Uribe initiates a strong, symbolic act towards reconciliation in Basque social relations. We ground our line of reasoning on Sara Ahmed's take on disorientation in social space as a negative bodily feeling, a shattering sensation of "one's belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life livable" (*Queer* 157). Taking into account the experience of an emotionally saturated community after years of systemic institutional and terrorist violence, we read Uribe's poetry as the textual intervention of an action that seeks to reorient and therefore transform the living conditions of experience of the Basque social body.

This action both constitutes and is constituted by an emotional and, indeed, ideological move that has been effectually summarized in the title of the collection by the tendering of the hand. Building on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of a minor literature, we first consider how this affective language exceeds and deterritorializes the traditional geographical, discursive and sentimental boundaries of Basque cultural nationalism; then, we analyze the production of Uribe's poetic expression within a specific temporality, in which Basque society demanded the end of violence in the Basque country; and, finally, we argue that this poet's self-conscious poetics of affect provides a cultural model for the democratization of the Basque social body reterritorialized in the transnational realm.

I am keenly aware that the contributions gathered in this special focus section can only begin to suggest other possible paths to conduct research along the lines marked by bodies, transnationalism and affect in recent Hispanic poetry. In fact, to initiate that kind of heuristic enterprise between and among scholars in Hispanic poetry constitutes, indeed, the overall objective of this editorial endeavor. In a way, it takes me forcefully backwards to the original ethos of this project as a response to the MLA Presidential Theme “#States of Insecurity” in that cold January of 2018 in New York City: to initiate an interdisciplinary dialogue among and between Hispanic cultures in search of our different commonalities through the transformational poetics of affect. It is this backward feeling that moves me forward to a relational, collegiate future within Hispanic studies. I am therefore truly thankful to the editorial team at *Studies in Twenty and Twenty-First Century Literature* for providing the professional platform to share this work.

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