

Foreword: Stories and Politics of Hispanism

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In 1915, just one year before Federico de Onís arrived in New York after accepting an appointment as professor at Columbia University with the mission to build a program for the teaching of Spanish language and culture—and five years before he founded the Instituto de las Españas—he was writing some of the first film criticism in Spain. He had accepted an offer by his friend Ortega y Gasset to publish periodically about the new medium in *España*, his new weekly magazine. It was a short commitment, soon interrupted by his move overseas. Onís was not so much interested in the present of film as in its future, what it could become. Even if the new medium was still only an initial gesture, an insinuation of something to come, its mass appeal was already evident. Its extraordinary capacity to bring together, in the same room, before the same film, people from every race, class, or cultural origin, speaking many different languages, made clear that it could only be considered a “new instrument for humanity” of extraordinary potential (Onís et al. 68). Once in the US, Onís would have the opportunity to experience first-hand the cultural and social processes that he had witnessed in film and to put them to good use. The decades-long promotion of Spanish culture in the US and Latin America that he started in 1916 required a deep knowledge of the same processes of modernity that he had admired so much in the movie industry.

Years later, after he had settled in New York, Juan Ramón Jiménez referred to him as a “Charlot Latino” (Ruiz-Manjón 15). Like the most famous actor in the world, Onís had the extraordinary capacity to be always identical to himself and yet always a successful character. The same perception was common among the many cultural visitors from Spain and Latin America whom Onís hosted through his Instituto de las Españas, which would later become the Hispanic Institute. For Moreno Villa or Concha Espina, among others, he was a constant performance of himself, systematically stressing his Spanishness both in his voice and his dress. He was not only the main cultural ambassador of Spain in the US, he was also “el más insigne modelo de nuestra raza” (Espina 142).

It was, of course, a very deliberate strategy that the film critic had the chance to learn from the screen. It was also a necessary way to make tradition modern, marketable, and popular. When he had to defend the relevance of his work in the

US before a Spanish audience and perhaps particularly against the strong criticism from his beloved mentor Unamuno, he chose a very Spanish icon: he was a Don Quixote in America. Far from weakening his national identity and dissolving it in the American melting pot, the contact with the US had allowed him to go deeper into an “españolismo radical” that opened every door to him (Onís, “El español” 266). His adventures in the New World allowed him to get closer to that “modelo de nuestra raza” that Concha Espina would see in him. That model was not so much a return as a projection: “Ya antes de salir de España sentía la atracción de la América española como razón última del ser histórico de España” (*España en América* 9). For Onís, the success of both his character and his cultural mission was not about any kind of mutual assimilation but rather a radical affirmation of difference, a fight for visibility that could only be achieved through a successful performance.

And so the timeless Don Quixote knew how to display the abilities of the modern Charlot. Onís was very conscious of the danger at the core of the success of the Spanish language in the US: if it was possible thanks to a popular demand driven by commercial ties with Latin America, the enemies of the Spanish language and Spain itself were making every effort to separate that pragmatic side from a cultural tradition that could only come from Spain, telling people to focus directly on Latin America and forget about the sources (Onís, “El español” 281). Don Quixote needed to learn Charlot’s abilities and become modern, adapting himself to a new public. The Spanish tradition had to be made attractive and successful for popular eyes. Don Quixote should become a star.

It was Onís’s Quixotic mission not only to avoid a dangerous split that would make Spain irrelevant but also to fulfill Spain’s destiny by modern means, to turn Spanish America into the culmination of its historical essence, as Fernando Degiovanni mentions in his contribution. It was, again, Concha Espina who described Onís’s and other Spanish professors’ role in the US in the most explicit terms: “Gracias, sobre todo, a los misioneros intelectuales que, pasito, con silenciosa vocación, se unen al profesorado estadounidense como paladines de las nuevas fundaciones que España hinca en las Américas. Para nunca perder ya sus colonias” (145).

One hundred years after Federico de Onís founded the Instituto de las Españas, on June 19, 2020, and in the context of the Black Lives Matter protests, a statue of Cervantes with Don Quixote and Sancho Panza kneeling in front of him was defaced at the Golden Gate park in San Francisco. Cervantes’s eyes were covered in red paint as if he were crying blood, the word “bastard” was written under his bust, and neo-Nazi signs were painted on the backs of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Spanish media, both on the right and the left, immediately condemned the attack as the product of the mob’s ignorance, while emphasizing the extreme injustice of defacing the bust of an author who was not only representative of universal, humanist values of tolerance but also a former slave. One of the very few attempts to understand what had happened from a different point of view, closer to the context of the protests themselves, even dismissed any possible connection between the statue and the political events behind the protests: “las manifestaciones globales en contra de la injusticia racial (de las que el derrumbe y tagging forman parte) poco tienen que ver con una pausada meditación sobre el

pasado imperial de España. . . . Cervantes aquí es lo de menos” (Jones). The one thing that expressions of outrage and attempts at “understanding” the gesture seem to have in common is that Cervantes should be left outside of political quarrels.

Ramón del Valle-Inclán was of a very different opinion when, in 1934, he called for exactly the same iconoclast gesture: “Para la próxima revuelta, espero que las masas vuelen con dinamita el monumento a Cervantes” (qtd. in Labrador 203). In the same vein, Cansinos Assens imagined in 1921 a very particular Statue of Cervantes that, fed up with its own monumentalization, chooses the liberation of suicide: “¿Qué recurso me queda para huir de sus enredos y mitificaciones? Sólo uno, suicidarme en estatua, destrozár este bronce en que han querido cuajar para siempre mi espíritu, vinculándole en una materia ruda” (264).

As the research of Germán Labrador, Christopher Britt, and others has made clear, there was a time (particularly around the celebrations of the tercentenary of *Don Quixote*, a few years before Onís’s arrival to New York) when the politicization of the Errant Knight and his creator, their consideration as ideological battlefields, was more ubiquitous than radical or extravagant.

The trajectory of Hispanism in the last 100 years as witnessed by the Instituto de las Españas/Casa Hispánica and its associated journals could be read as a synchronic dialogue between those two emblems: on the one hand, the self-fashioning of its founder, Federico de Onís, as a Quixotic adventurer ready to expand Spanish literature and culture throughout the Americas, and, on the other, the violent image of a “cultural” monument thrown into politics. They are not a beginning or an ending but rather a dialectic tension always present in the discipline as the articles included in this special issue make clear. All of them have in common the interrogation of the constant, reciprocal dependence between power and knowledge. The need to address that dependence has, of course, been made extraordinarily urgent by the circumstances of this centenary: the COVID crisis has accelerated an attack on the university and, specifically, the humanities, that has been developing for years. The withdrawal of public funding and the growing imperative to turn education into a profitable economic investment for institutions, students, and their parents have forced academics and educators in the humanities to find new narratives to defend the legitimacy of their endeavor. A growing ideological polarization demands a constant political positioning that relegates the possibility of “academic freedom” to the place of a relic inside a crumbling ivory tower, and the teaching of ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings to the suspicion of complicity. In this moment of crisis, these articles offer both a necessary diachronic look at the development of the discipline in the last century and an urgent interrogation of its new “conditions of possibility.” The affirmation (or not) of its present relevance in these articles requires the need to engage some variation of the unavoidable question that Sebastiaan Faber points out in his contribution: Whom have we served and whom should we serve now?

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Federico de Onís is the object of two texts in this special issue. Degiovanni traces the post-imperial implications of his conception of Hispanism and his

extraordinary work as a cultural broker and institution builder. Onís repositioned Spain and its cultural relationships with the Americas within a geopolitical landscape conditioned by new dynamics of international commerce. The demand for Spanish in the US, linked to the opening of new markets in Latin America, was the premise to give Spain a privileged position in the administration of cultural prestige. Simultaneously, far from conceiving the Americas as a cultural periphery, in Onís's mind they would constitute the very historic destiny of Spain. The frontier had the capacity to reveal the true essence of the center through the revelation of yet other forms of Spanishness.

The paradox of the fact that such a political mission was insistently presented as apolitical is at the center of Cristina Pérez Jiménez's argument. A meticulous archival search in the press and personal documents of the period takes us to the confrontation between Onís's obstinate silence about the Spanish Civil War and the demand for a clear political positioning coming from Latino workers' communities. One step further, Pérez Jiménez sees in those two conceptions of the relationship between culture and politics the future distinction between two disciplines: a politically neutral Hispanism (Onís's "Estudios Hispánicos") versus a nascent discipline with a political commitment at its core (Latino studies).

Some of the texts in this issue have a very strong autobiographical and testimonial component. Masiello's piece, for example, is a rich and condensed personal history of all the avatars of the discipline: from the "archive fever" privileged by the philological background of the Spanish postwar exiles to the later prominence of politics and theory; from the proliferation of an academic celebrity culture brought up by new market demands in the 70s to the "power of the margins" in the 90s. She concludes with a concerned note about the shrinkage of the humanities and current anti-intellectual trends, worries that are shared, unavoidably, by other authors.

Like Francine Masiello, John Beverley sees in the role of Cuba an essential turning point for Hispanism and Latin Americanism—the beginning of an engagement with politics, together with a flourishing period for the discipline as illustrated by the institutional project of his own department at Pittsburgh. There, a focus on Latin American studies made a prominent presence of his department in the field possible but, according to Beverley, those days seem to be over. The same image that I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, a defaced Cervantes in Golden Gate Park, is read as an emblem of the mortality of Hispanism. Its last image of totality, even if "contradictory," given by its relationship with the "coloniality of power," seems to be condemned, along with its institutional articulation, to the assimilation into "something more multifarious, global, or 'glocal.'" But in the meantime, Beverley advocates for a return to a Gramscian "worldly" criticism by reverting to philology instead of turning to the otherworldly, "apocalyptic" philosophical flights found in Moreiras and others. Far from being loyal to the past, that new philological apparatus would put together a Cervantine tradition of debunking and the one performed on his statue in San Francisco, no longer just a symbol of its mortality but also a script of the strategies for its survival.

Beverley's pessimism about the future of the field returns in Resina's piece, where Hispanism does not seem to have much of a future either. According to Joan Ramon Resina, Hispanism had to deal historically with a series of discomforts:

from the very beginning, its departments owed their existence to the demand for language training. As Degiovanni also mentions in his text, this would start an endless search for status and prestige, a “yearning for legitimation” that produced a tendency to “mimic the current signs of success.” That dynamic was, for example, behind the turn to theory that privileged French, German, or American sources over theory coming from within or the consideration that “Hispanic Theory” was and is nothing but a “Theory of Hispanism.” The crisis of the field and the changing market demands bring with them, according to Resina, the disappearance of the specialist. This void should be filled by those in search of a new kind of audience, outside of the academic boundaries. The future is in the hands of a public intellectual who leaves behind the comforts of professionalism and seclusion in favor of a kind of amateurism understood, with Said, as an opening beyond disciplinary and professional restrictions.

Whom do scholars serve? This is the key question behind Faber’s article—and it can also be found, in one way or another, in most of the interventions in this special issue. The relationship between Hispanists and the state are traced from the Spanish Civil War period to the present. As Degiovanni and Pérez Jiménez already mentioned, that service, in the name of patriotism, often took the form of “disinterested vocation,” a defense of scholarly rigor beyond the contamination of partisanship and activism. But that position (followed by Onís, Castro, and many prominent Hispanists of the period) coexisted with others where not only compatibility but also mutual dependence between scholarship and activism was displayed, as was the case of José Rubia Barcia. Not much seems to have changed. Nowadays, a political confrontation such as the Catalan *procés* is, again, an opportunity for different power groups to enlist the loyal service of intellectuals in support of one side or the other.

Another aspect of that dialogue between power and knowledge is the geopolitical stakes in naming academic disciplines themselves. According to Emily Francomano’s analysis, the growing weaponization of the medieval period in the hands of the alt-right, both in Spain and the US, is just the last instance of a long, winding trajectory in which “our field has never not been a site of struggle” (Boyarin; qtd. in Francomano 64). The transitions from Hispano-medievalism to medieval Iberia or Mediterranean studies, from medieval to non-modern and so many others, are not only the signs of ever-changing political backgrounds and balances but also of a discipline that was always, by its very nature, multilingual, comparative, and interdisciplinary, with ever-dynamic boundaries. To advocate for a “more mobile Hispanism” (Doubleday and Sampedro 12; qtd. in Francomano 69) is not only consequent with the very nature of the field but also an opportunity to make the texts more appealing to students. Nevertheless, that configuration of a shifting discipline needs to fight for its own representation and recognition, avoiding disciplinary marginalization. Having dynamic boundaries should not mean turning the field unrecognizable.

A shifting discipline requires undisciplined objects. If Francomano’s article focuses on the need to resist a weaponization of the medieval through a constant redefinition of the boundaries and limits behind naming the discipline, Claudia Cabello Hutt stresses the need to identify objects of study that make any attempt of universalization impossible. Her complex engagement with a diverse archive

of queer Latin American authors that resists forced invisibility while resulting from multiple variations of epistemic violence presents her with a critical question: “Can queer feminist theories in the Global South resist the potential homogenization, disavowal of localities, and specific embodiments under a seeming universal category of queer?” Halberstam’s concept of queerness, chosen by Cabello Hutt as the starting point of her research, points beyond a question of academic disciplines or objects of study: queerness conceived as “an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules and eccentric economic practices” strongly resonates in a present in which the precariousness of ways of life and knowledge are the conditions of possibility for new strategies of survival.

Discipline as mobility is at the core of Josiah Blackmore’s overview of “Lusophone studies,” where an ever-shifting name for the field serves as a battleground for visibility (not only for the field itself, but also for the marginalized national and identity cultures that constitute it). That is why the “academic landscape” that Blackmore favors is the ocean. Trajectories, intersections, and encounters displace contours in maritime studies, as they should, according to Blackmore’s view, in the whole discipline.

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If there is something common to all these extraordinary analyses, it is the fact that Hispanism, in its many forms, does not inhabit any guaranteed space (or even name), and it never did. Its shape, like its legitimacy, cannot be conceived as anything but an ongoing project of self-transformation that always runs the risk of dissolution. As in mimicry, the negotiation with risk means inhabiting the skin of many others without losing oneself but rather becoming a space of endless creativity radically open to the other. Learning to inhabit the brink, to be the brink.

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