

## Hispanic Literatures: One Breath, a Million Words

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### Abstract

Nothing can stop the tides of innovation in art: it is this idea that a captive, dirty, weak, and hungry Don Quixote embraced to affirm himself as the heroic referent for the emerging Romance literatures. Indeed, this adaptability has been the secret of his longevity in the Western canon. Like Don Quixote, Hispanic literatures cannot build their identity on a pristine, metropolitan, and uniform Spanish language elevated by its exclusivity. If literary Hispanism is to be alive, it needs to evolve into a complex cultural construction that binds together the oral and literate languages of America and Spain and takes into account transatlantic flows and contradictions. Breathing, a common feature of both literary patterns and a rhythm of nature, will serve as the much-needed metaphor to bridge Latin American oral cultures, which have found permanence and expression in written texts, with literate cultures, including even the most urban, digital, and technologically advanced from Mexico, Chile or Spain.

*Keywords:* Hispanism, Latin American literature, Spanish literature, nationalism, ecocriticism, literary theory.

### Resumen

Nada puede impedir el ímpetu de la renovación artística, ésa es la idea que un don Quijote cautivo, sucio, débil y hambriento abrazó para afirmarse como el referente heroico de las nuevas literaturas romances. De hecho, esa idea de la adaptación del arte a los tiempos ha sido el secreto de su longevidad en el canon occidental. Como don Quijote, las literaturas hispánicas no pueden construir su identidad sobre una lengua española exclusiva, prístina, uniforme y metropolitana. Si el hispanismo literario desea sobrevivir ha de evolucionar hacia una compleja construcción cultural capaz de dar cabida a las lenguas orales y letradas de América y España y a los flujos y contradicciones transatlánticos. El respirar, una cualidad común de los patrones literarios y del ritmo de la naturaleza, servirá de metáfora que conecte las culturas orales de Latinoamérica, que han encontrado su permanente expresión en textos escritos, con las culturas letradas, incluso con las más urbanas, digitales y tecnológicamente avanzadas de México, Chile o España.

*Palabras clave:* Hispanismo, literatura latinoamericana, literatura española, nacionalismo, ecocrítica, teoría literaria.

### Regionalism, Nationalism, Hispanism

No one should be denigrated for expressing feelings of love and respect for the motherland: There is nothing inherently harmful in art and literature that promotes knowledge of the native land. However, serious problems arise when clear-cut cultural values are connected to regional landscapes or when historical readings of national geography are built on exclusion, segregation, and ethnicity. When love for one's country

becomes nationalism, a hierarchical order of countries and human beings begins to emerge, leading to discrimination and imperialism.

From about 1870 to 1930, Spanish literature, natural sciences and politics were engaged in the search for a landscape that represented the national character as well as a basis on which to implement the reforms needed to revive a nation whose empire was coming to an end. After the Civil War (1936-1939), the landscape of Castile embodied that nation, a landscape that under Franco associated Hispanism with the epic idea of a Catholic Spanish empire that extended around the world, from the Americas to the Philippines and the Pacific, including large portions of Europe. Hispanism represented the empire where the sun never set and a nation destined to be the preserve of Western civilization.<sup>1</sup>

The Spanish empire is long gone, and its archetype, grandiose and martial, has largely disappeared from the conceptualization of Spain, since the politically centralized administration of Franco's state with its Castilian representation of the country no longer fits into the new post-Franco Spanish administrative organization: When Spain became a full democracy in 1975, the country's political government was divided into seventeen autonomous regions and two autonomous cities, all with their own governments and parliaments. The Castilian discourse on Spain's national identity became irrelevant and outdated in the iconoclastic cultural movement called "Movida" that characterized those inaugural days of democracy in Madrid during the 1980s and which spread throughout Spain in the form of varied and stimulating cultural movements in Vigo, Barcelona, Bilbao, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, and San Cristóbal de la Laguna. Freedom, hedonism and cosmopolitan and libertarian attitudes and ways of life were celebrated throughout the country.

After almost half a century of this explosion of democratic politics and joyful creativity, in a world that seems to be more concerned than ever about the planetary consequences of climate change, in complicated environmental circumstances that COVID-19 has highlighted along with the co-dependence of all beings, new nationalisms are effectively emerging not only within Spain, but also in Europe and America. The great pasts to be recovered and the nations to be rebuilt are proliferating: Catalonia is designing a national identity on the basis of an ideal political nation that is reaffirmed in symbols such as the Catholic enclave of Montserrat Abbey or in reaction to a centralized Francoist Spain that no longer exists, the moderate Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) maintains the 19<sup>th</sup>-century figure of Sabino Arana as an inspiration, and a residual Spanish nationalism is resurfacing to the point that a new ultraconservative Spanish nationalist party with Castilian overtones has found a place in Congress. In Europe, Brexit reminds us of the British Empire, and that ideal America present in Trump's call to "make America great

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<sup>1</sup> See Casado de Otaola for a study of the relationship of landscapes and national character in the works of the Commission for the Geological Map of Spain under the direction of the engineer Manuel Fernández de Castro in 1873. For a cosmopolitan view of the nation challenging that of the dry Castilian land of solitary ascetics, warlike mystics, and dramatic heroes, see Marrero Henríquez (2011) on the Spanish writers of the Atlantic Ocean and their poetics of the sea.

again” echoes Latin American caudillos like Maduro and Ortega or oddities like Bolsonaro in Brazil and Matteo Salvini in Italy.

In this disconcerting international situation, the term Hispanism, for so long reserved for the cultural productions of Spain and Latin America that have the Spanish language as their vehicle and the metropolitan Castilian imprint as a measure of their value, has undergone a radical transformation. Hispanism has been ecologized, has expanded its cultural ecosystem and has become inclusive. The Mapuches, the Quechuas and other literary manifestations rooted in the ancestral cultures of America have found a place in Hispanism under the rubric of neo-indigenism; Portuguese cultural manifestations along with those of Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country have maintained their Hispanic similarities within Iberian studies; transatlantic studies have dealt with the ocean as a network of Hispanic relations back and forth between America and Europe, and with the official advent of the global Hispanophone field in 2015, institutionalized as an area of study by the American academy through the approval by the MLA of a permanent forum with this name, Hispanism has extended its focus beyond Latin America, the Caribbean and the Iberian Peninsula to include the Spanish presence in North Africa, Equatorial Guinea, the Philippines, the occupied territories of Western Sahara, refugee camps in Algeria, the Sephardic and Morisco diasporas and other places of cultural and linguistic interest.

When Campoy-Cubillo and Sampedro Vizcaya state that the global Hispanophone area requires “a careful consideration of theoretical approaches that could more effectively address this highly diverse and dispersed archive of cultural artifacts, histories, knowledge, experiences and geographies, without contributing to the reification of the colonial contours that drove its production in the first place,” (2) they are implicitly calling for a binding theory of Hispanic literatures, which would subsume linguistic fractures, competing political interests and cultural differences within a common framework. Given the global challenges that society must face in this 21st century, such an objective deserves the positive response of a Hispanism that diminishes clear geographic and cultural borders, that includes an ecosystemic discourse within the development of its hypotheses, and that reveals itself as a rich heterogeneous starting point for building the foundations not only of an ecocritical theory of Hispanism but also of a general ecocritical theory of global scope.

### **Ecologizing Hispanism**

If life and words influence each other in the production of meanings and “matter and meaning are not separate elements [but ones...] that merge inextricably” (Latour 3), the classic statement “think global, act local” explains why Hispanism has opened its scope to go beyond regionalisms and nationalisms and has reached broader conceptual frameworks. In a context of ecological crisis, Hispanism has become an agent of meaning and historicity, a word that, in search of the right perspective for the present times, contributes to decarbonizing the world and de-nationalizing the mind, a word that acts

performatively and challenges “the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things” (Barad 133).

Ecological Hispanism studies not only Latin American literatures rooted in pre-Hispanic ecocentric cosmogonies, but also Spanish and Latin American literature of European, Christian and anthropocentric cosmogonic descent, since all of them have produced works in which the health of the environment and the people who inhabit it is both a mirror and an index of the qualities of their cultures.<sup>2</sup> In fact, behind the technological celebration of the avant-garde there was a strong concern for the dangers of planetary destruction, pure and transcendent poetry tended to connect human beings with nature in an intimate way, and the social and literary commitment of the Spain of the 1950s concealed a possible derivation towards an ecological commitment. An ecological Hispanism welcomes the concept of ‘indigenohispanism’ (*hispanoindigenismo*), and when it acts in a performative way, the term plain Hispanism also welcomes a myriad of cultures of American, European, Atlantic, African and Pacific descent.

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ecological circumstances of the Anthropocene era, reasons for the performative ecologization of the meaning of Hispanism which I am advocating here are found in the ecological cultural relations within the works of the poets, critics and theorists. In his anthology of the poetry of Homero Aridjis, Aníbal Salazar Anglada establishes a network of relationships between Aridjis and writers, from Dante, Cervantes and Shakespeare to Darío, Nervo, Lugones and López Velarde, from Tablada and Los Contemporáneos<sup>3</sup> to Arreola and Octavio Paz, from José Emilio Pacheco and Jaime Labastida to Baudelaire, Novalis, Hölderlin and Rilke, from Paul Éluard, Pavese and Neruda to Pound, Ungaretti, Alberti, Lorca, Cernuda and Bonnefoy. In Homero Aridjis’ poetry mythical figures from the Greek classics such as Pallas Athena, Apollo, Aphrodite and Eros coexist with the Aztec gods, Huitzilopochtli, Coatlicue, and Xipe Totec. According to Salazar Anglada,

Aridjis makes these traditions his own, the Hellenic and the Aztec, because both come from his heritage: his father, Nicias, was of Greek origin; his mother, Josefina, was Mexican, born in Contepec. These chosen points, which we would call modern “intertextualities”, are but the tip of an iceberg that is a sum of traditions, ancient and modern.<sup>4</sup> (29)

Cases like the “Mapuche Project” are quite relevant, since “it aims to create an intercultural poetry that recovers the ancestral memory of the native communities and is composed of writers of Mapuche origin and culture” (Carrasco 184)]. The “Mapuche Project” includes poets like Eric Troncoso, Clemente Riedemann, Juan Pablo Riveros, Pedro Alonzo Retamal, Elicura Chihuailaf, Lorenzo Aillapán, José Santos Lincomán, Jaime Luis Huenún, Bernardo Colipán, Rayen Kvyeh, Faumelisa Manquelipán, Adriana Pinda, Maribel Mora, Jacqueline Canihuán, Kelv Lihuen Tranamil and the poets of Chiloé Island

<sup>2</sup> See Heydt for an introduction of concepts belonging to indigenous cosmologies in the national political constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador. See Heffes for a proposal of a Latin American critical ecology.

<sup>3</sup> Los Contemporáneos refers to a group of Mexican poets (José Gorostiza, Xavier Villaurrutia, Carlos Pallicer, and others) that were active in the late 1920s, and to *Contemporáneos*, the main literary magazine that gave voice to them.

<sup>4</sup> All translations are either my own, or those of Ellen Skowronski-Polito and Manuel Wood Wood.

such as Carlos Trujillo, Rosabetty Muñoz, Varsovia Viveros, Sergio Mansilla, Nelson Gorres, Mario Contreras and Mario García (Carrasco 184).

Arturo Arias and Luis Cárcamo Huechante's conversation about the poetry of contemporary native American authors points to the problem of selecting a language as a vehicle for writing poetry. The languages of the native peoples of the Americas are based on oral tradition and have to adapt their phonetics to the phonetic foundations of the Spanish alphabet in order to materialize in written texts. Some authors choose not to be translated and use the Spanish alphabet only as a means for the written transcription and monitoring of their poems, others prefer to publish bilingually, others, even those who do not speak an original American language, must pour their particular cultural worldviews into Spanish, the language of European descent. These authors include Briceida Cuevas Cob, Maya-Yucatec; Natalio Hernández, Nahuatl, also from Mexico; Odi González, Quechua from Peru; Leonel Lienlaf, Mapuche Mapudungun; and other poets who write in Spanish but from indigenous traditions, such as Rosa Chávez (Mayan, Guatemala), Jaime Huenún (Mapuche-Huilliche), Roxana Miranda Rupailaf (Mapuche-Huilliche) and Liliana Ancalao (Mapuche, Argentina) (Pierce 2-8). An ecological Hispanism is enriched by the choice of any of these poets, since there is no possible decline of Spanish when it is acted upon in a performative way, either to give voice to an ancestral culture, or to preserve the poetry that uses Spanish only as a mere phonetic transmission channel.

From a theoretical perspective, I have outlined a Poetics of Breathing as a general ecocritical literary theory capable of responding to the different traditions that flourish within and outside Hispanism (Marrero Henríquez 2019). Wherever problematic aesthetic and ideological differences arise, such a poetics seeks to be inclusive and comprehensive by finding common ground in the metaphor of *breathing*, to respond positively to each of the following rhetorical questions: Is not the continuous rhythm of inspiration and exhalation the origin of oral and written poetry? Is not this poetic rhythm everywhere in all of nature and its regularities, spatial (meanders, geological strata, fractal structures) and temporal (tides, seasons, fertility cycles)? Is not the capture of this rhythm the privileged object of research in the arts and sciences? Is not even the most urban, digital and technologically advanced culture a sophisticated manifestation of evolved nature? The perception of regularities inspires poetry and is the foundation of scientific knowledge, since rhythm is diffused in nature and culture and on both sides of the Atlantic, in the works of Latin American literature, which is nourished by the diverse imaginations and traditions of the original peoples of America and the ideologies or world views they uphold, as well as in European and Latin American literary works based on Western imaginations and traditions, both in the ancestral peoples of oral culture and in the highly technological and literate ones (Marrero Henríquez 2019).<sup>5</sup>

Working with different tools and from different perspectives, other authors point in the same direction. Luis I. Prádanos and Mark Anderson have contributed to a broader Hispanism insofar as they consider that "ecocriticism must openly dialogue with and learn

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<sup>5</sup> See Skowronski for further description of a Poetics of Breathing. See Wagensberg for further development on the biocultural link between the rhythm and harmony common to nature and culture.

from [...] counter-hegemonic social-ecological movements, as well as be open to being imbued with ecological philosophies external to the dominant Euro-American environmentalism” (2). Quoting Santos, Nunes and Meneses, Prádanos and Anderson consider that “this project implies ‘the recognition of the epistemological diversity of the world, that is, the diversity of the knowledge systems that underlie the practices of different social groups around the world [...] that require] the replacement of the monoculture of scientific knowledge by an ecology of knowledge’” (Prádanos and Anderson 2). Prádanos has also worked on the similarities between the degrowth movement in southern Europe and post-development projects in Latin America, as well as between the notion of ecological time adopted by indigenous Andean cosmopolitics and the “slow” movement in Mediterranean Europe (Prádanos).

Jorge Marcone considers “the systematic absence of Amazonian texts in the canon of every Andean nation as a symptom of the inadequacies of academic acceptance of transcultural theories in countries characterized by the coexistence of a plurality of ontological worlds” (49-68). Laura Barbas-Rhoden “studies gender as a theoretical means to prevent the pluricultural context of Latin America from being blurred or obscured in journalistic and academic discourses” (69-92).<sup>6</sup> Imagining a rich multicultural nation, Andrea Casals and Pablo Chiuminatto consider the challenging cultural role of the desert, mountains, Patagonia and the archipelagos of the south before the classic Chile linked to the Central Valley.<sup>7</sup>

The inclusive and comprehensive environmental Hispanism which has begun to emerge decentralizes Hispanism’s metropolitan and traditionalist ideology and turns its theory and critique into a complex field of research that also addresses the benefit of global environmental awareness. Breathing, a figurative as well as literal action common to living nature and culture, snakes through the million figurative words shown in the diverse paths of Hispanism by Anderson, Arias and Carcamo Huechante, Barbas-Rhoden, Campoy-Cubillo and Sampedro Vizcaya, Carrasco, Casals and Chiuminatto, Heffes, Marcone, Marrero Henríquez, Prádanos, Salazar Anglada and many others, because when it acts performatively, Hispanism breathes together with the diversity of American and world cultures, from those of oral descent to the most urban, digital and technologically advanced that, in the end, are nothing more than sophisticated manifestations of evolved nature.

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<sup>6</sup> See Barbas-Rhoden (2014) for a proposal of transnational Latin American ecocriticism. See Fornis-Broggi for a work that represents the multifaceted picture of a complex and problematic idea of Latin America.

<sup>7</sup> See also Casals.

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