Introduction

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The essays that constitute the core of this initial publication of Hispanic Issues On Line deal with a variety of concerns related to productive tensions in our disciplines. The present collection can be seen as a continuation of related discussions in two recent volumes published in our printed series, whose current venue is Vanderbilt University Press. In a more or less direct way, it is the articulation of Hispanic studies in the U.S. academy that seems to be questioned in Latin America Writes Back, edited by Emil Volek (Routledge, 2002), and Ideologies of Hispanism, edited by Mabel Moraña (Vanderbilt, 2005). The animated responses elicited by those publications speak to the need for further discussion about topics related to our profession. For this initial electronic publication we requested a brief “think piece” from a number of colleagues asking each of them to write on a topic of choice related to our intellectual and professional lives. We would now like to extend this same invitation to the rest of the members of our academic community, who are encouraged to comment on the issues raised in the brief essays presented here and address relevant pragmatic and intellectual points of discussion.

A theme that resonates in the present collection is the extension of research interests beyond the traditional realm of literature and the anxieties produced by such an expansion. One might say that, far from being resolved, this issue has been exacerbated by the emergence of “cultural studies” with its ambiguous nature and goals, and its status of permanent potentiality as a pinnacle of interdisciplinarity. As Castillo and Egginton contend in their essay, in many cases a sort of vague
approach presented under that widely used rubric materializes in little more than a descriptive effort of some of the contents of the cultural magma. While for many critics today the focus on cultural studies seems to be fading away prior to actually having become that desired connector of analytical complexities that it once promised, its relevance in areas such as gender studies cannot be denied. Thus, David Foster addresses the importance of an interface between masculinist and queer studies and the role that it can play in the larger enterprise of literary/cultural studies. Others point to cultural studies’ importance in the “revitalization” of Golden Age studies (Cruz), or to the valuable work accomplished by some Latin American followers of the Birmingham School (Volek, Moraña). In any case, the expansion of research to other cultural forms beyond literature is probably here to stay, partly due to scholarly and market pressures and the drive to encompass and produce more (De la Campa), and also because the privileged status of literature has been called into question to such an extent that its study is virtually absent from some “language and literature” departments.

A strategy which could be used to deal with these new realities might be the development of a more fluid relationship with ‘theory,’ something that constitutes another of the topics present in several of the contributions below. For a long time, Spanish departments have been seen as environments alien to theoretical fashions. While this perception still blurs the vision of some of our colleagues working on other cultures, the truth is that it no longer holds, as can easily be seen when considering the innovative work done by departments and research groups nationwide, to the point that it might be argued, as Emil Volek does in reference to U.S. Latin Americanism, that the field is “over-theorized and under-researched.” Volek seems to be especially wary of the current predilection for cultural studies as practiced within the U.S. academy, with its focus on identity politics and a penchant for the sociological at the expense of what makes works of art unique. From a different perspective, Mabel Moraña cautions us about not “throwing out the baby with the bath water” or i.e. to dismantle one canon only to replace it with another. Thus, cultural studies’ lack of emphasis on literature and specifically on the question of aesthetic representation is seen as a missed opportunity for a more encompassing discussion of a complex canonical corpus which defies oversimplification and, in fact, offers many keys for an understanding of some of the very same issues that cultural studies seeks to illuminate. The importance of literature is also underscored by Tom Lewis, who reminds us of its role “in the formation and reproduction of society.” Lewis believes that a “rediscovery of abandoned or neglected pathways” (i.e., sociohistorical approaches)
combined with new insights propitiated by other disciplines (for example, neural science) might re-energize the study of literature as well as other forms of art through an exploration of issues such as the dialectical relation between emotion and cognition in ideological discourse.

A non-dismissive treatment of tradition still leaves room for innovative approaches to literature and culture, but with the great advantage of avoiding what Ortega y Gasset once denounced as an unproductive adañismo (the pretension of starting a creative project in an intellectual vacuum by denying the contributions of one’s forerunners.) This acknowledgement of, and dialogue with, tradition enriches the critical enterprise and has the potential for alerting us to the traps and dangers of dogmatisms.

The epistemological developments of the last decades, which put the Humanities in a mood of self-examination, have recently translated into a growing awareness of our disciplines’ history and practices. In this sense, the metacritical role of theory is especially relevant as it helps us to “examine the unquestioned assumptions and ideological biases of our starting points,” as Margaret Greer indicates, arguing at the same time for an inclusive Hispanism which encourages cross-disciplinary debates. One might add that this sort of critical thinking has facilitated a questioning of old assumptions in connection with the imperialistic and/or colonialist dynamics that supported many of the efforts associated with Hispanism, and has allowed us to take stock of the discipline’s omission of minority voices, such as those of women, indigenous groups, or nations without states. Such reconsideration is not only a matter of justice and intellectual honesty; it also allows us to create new lines of inquiry into an already complex reality of the symbolic production of the Hispanic world.

These endeavors are more likely to be complete when taking into account the work that is being carried out by researchers in other parts of the world and, for that matter, by colleagues at U.S. institutions who may not be working along the same intellectual lines as one’s own. Hispanism has grown to be a global colloquium in which academies that insist on producing exclusively for their own audiences will be missing out on much of the conversation. This is especially true of a field of inquiry encompassing several continents with a long and intricate history of interconnectedness (De la Campa, Moraña, Volek.) For Brad Epps, “the engagement with other national circuits that are also not predominately Hispanic constitutes at once a challenge and an opportunity for all of those concerned with the state of ‘our’ disciplines.” Epps’s point is that
our work within the US academy needs to be cognizant of what is happening outside of it, that is, beyond the institution itself as well as its immediate North American context. To the need for interconnectedness within and beyond the “U.S.-Latin American-Iberian triangle,” Epps calls attention to “the state of academic labor” and its implications for graduate programs and the state of our disciplines worldwide.

What seems to be present in most, though not all, of these think pieces is the notion of inclusiveness and plurality: the idea that the interrogation and criticism of a canon should not lead to the obliteration of memory. Several think pieces allow us to glimpse into particular aspects of a colleague’s own intellectual journey and how s/he reflects on current trends in the profession. Edward Friedman shares with us the trajectory of his own academic journey through changes that have taken place within U.S. Hispanism following Spain’s transition to democracy and the impact of post-structuralist theory and its aftermath on literary studies. He also points to a shift of interest and resources from Peninsular to Latin American Studies in line with changing expectations of students and professionals in these fields. Anne Cruz focuses on the present state of Golden Age studies in the U.S., attributing its “toppling from the hierarchy” to a loss of interest by students and “belatedness” in engaging theory, a belatedness which, according to her, characterized Spanish departments until the 1980s and eventually turned into an “advantage” with the rise of cultural studies. While we neither share the general tenor of this assessment nor the diagnosis regarding the health of Golden Age studies, it is clear that the field has been both enriched by the interdisciplinary tendencies of current research and (at times) impoverished by a lack of engagement with/or close reading of literary texts. Gustavo Pérez Firmat shares this preoccupation with the “decline of close reading” and advances a different argument: that the demands of University Presses and their marketing of books dealing with Hispanic topics to non-Hispanists tends to push scholars toward a theoretical overload and a broadening of focus which ultimately leads to a “watered-down” Hispanism. Román de la Campa also deals with the question of market pressures as he addresses the case of Spanish in a globalized context and offers suggestions for a reshaping of our disciplines. He espouses a different use of theory, one which can illuminate “the growing role of the market in both production and consumption of artistic objects” and which involves an awareness of the “exigencies of the social text” as well as close attention to “a renewed aesthetic realm” and literature’s role within it. David Castillo and William Egginton for their part argue for a balance between theory and history (or
sociohistorical approaches) as well as between the meaning of a text and what is outside of it, since both are the result of a hermeneutical exercise. They further reflect on the critics’ expanding search for new ethical and/or political grounding in the realm of multiculturalism, ecofeminism, and human rights.

Some of the same tensions that have surfaced in these writings by colleagues in literature are evident in some of the contributions by colleagues in Hispanic linguistics, who reflect on the changes within their discipline as well as on the issue of communication with colleagues in Hispanic literatures when they are both housed in the same department. Among colleagues in Hispanic linguistics there seems to be a division between those who focus on quantitative or experimental approaches with an eye toward language acquisition and its implications for pedagogical purposes, and those who prefer “critical discourse analysis and other forms of interpretative, qualitative analysis” (Hualde). The latter feel a natural kinship with literary critics, as do those who are attempting to revitalize historical linguistics by focusing on issues of grammaticalization (Ocampo, Dworkin.)

Interestingly, the disconnection between literature and linguistics might be attributed to the advent, first, of generative linguistics and its dismissal of philology, and later, by the advances of post-structuralism–most especially its postmodernist cultural studies strain (Hualde.) To some extent one might say that the reintroduction of close reading as a tool that goes beyond the old stylistics can reinforce recent advances in cultural criticism and might even serve to reestablish a modicum of common ground between linguistics and literature. This could be especially attractive to departments and programs which seek better integration of their components and better training of students, particularly on the graduate level. The Hispanic linguistics think pieces are introduced below by Francisco Ocampo, the editor of this section of the publication.

We hope that this is only the first of many exchanges in the future on matters concerning our profession at a time when our departments (especially in large public institutions) are being tested by ever increasing enrollments in Spanish without commensurate resources. At the same time, as several major research universities re-direct their efforts to achieve specific goals (Minnesota, for instance, aspires to become one of the top three public institutions), departments are forced to rethink their own respective missions to conform to larger institutional needs and aspirations.

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