

Introduction

In this volume we collect a series of essays on poetry and poetics from the Hispanic world. As much as these papers address intellectual questions, they are offered as an expression of the passionate commitment of scholars who continue to read, teach, and study poetry. All of us who write about poetry work against the grain. We fight an overwhelmingly strong general and professional interest in prose. We struggle against the appeal and accessibility of the compelling story, all the ways there are to tell it, and all the theories that abound to analyze it. For decades now, we have been complaining about the loss of ground to prose fiction and the attention that it receives in writing and in the classroom. Yet we remain convinced that poetry offers a hold on the human spirit that must be defended and resurrected in the twenty-first century. From the pieces that follow, it is evident that others share our point of view.

Armed only with our enthusiasm and faith in our colleagues, in 2008 we issued a call for papers: an invitation to participate in two interdependent colloquia. We received positive responses from Latin America, Europe, and the US, and from scholars whose work covers a great chronological, critical, and theoretical span. Back then we thought of our project in the following terms: “*Poetics of Hispanism* aspires to address a shortage of intellectual exchange by putting together divergent answers to a two-fold question, namely, ‘what is Hispanic poetry’s destiny today, and what part in its fate do critics play?’” A series of other questions derived from these initial two. Can a shift in theoretical and/or critical approaches to poetry advance its cause, increase its readership, and address the question of accessibility? Should scholars be concerned with these issues? What are we doing with poetry today and how does it make a difference? How does poetry, past and present, insert itself in its (and our) intellectual and cultural environment?

As conveners, we hoped that the two colloquia would produce conversations, discussions, and disagreements that would reveal the directions in which

our colleagues are taking critical thinking on poetry today. As editors of this volume, we wish to go beyond description and to explore the intersections and undercurrents that came to light during the two encounters. Through the provocative dissidence of the studies that appear here, we have undertaken an assessment of poetry's vital signs, and we have discovered hidden strengths.

We first met in February 2009 to begin our conversation. These preliminary presentations made all the participants aware of the diversity of fields and approaches that were being considered and allowed the fruitful discord to begin. We met for a second time in February 2010 to discuss the final product that was the result of individual work and collective conversation. During this second colloquium, each paper was assigned a respondent. The interaction that developed through these three different stages provided satisfying, creative, and insightful responses to the challenge of the initial call for papers. Some participants focused on the way poets rethink the forms, language, and ultimate purpose of their art. Others discussed how we as scholars and teachers must look to reground the meaning of poetry in a world of high speed communication, bullet points, two-minute sound bites, and secular cynicism. Of course, these two currents come together as artists and scholars examine the underpinnings of their fundamental tasks, their labors of love.

Normally this type of introduction requires a neat categorization of the various papers to follow. One of the divisions might be by "type of poetic discourse." In this regard, one could align Urayoán Noel's piece on "translanguage" with Roberta Quance's on Lorca as studies of political poetry, that is, poetry that reaches beyond the aesthetic and into the realm of politics. Gwen Kirkpatrick's study also bears the imprint of politics in the poetic reconfiguring of the past for purposes of the present. Michelle Clayton's exploration of avant-garde poetry opens the question of form to issues of context, values, and influence, all of which ultimately touch upon the desire to break with established visions and socio-political structures that define the beginning of the twentieth-century.

The study by Marisol Barbón combines political considerations with literary history. Her point of departure is a comment on eighteenth century Latin American poetry made by Andrew Bush in his chapter in the *Cambridge History of Latin America*, in which he refers to that period as the "cien años de soledad" of colonial literature. Barbón locates the colonial poetry of the Viceroyalty of Peru in its socio-political moment, and makes the case for subtle connections between the contradictory feelings of loyalty and political resent-

ment. Yet Barbón achieves another goal; she turns these obscure texts into surprisingly appealing objects of pedagogical and scholarly attention. María Paz Moreno looks at literary history through the prism of the “ineffable” as the core of visionary poetry. In a reflection on the history and actuality of the *romance*, Mary Gaylord gives an informative overview of this genre, which lies at the center of the Hispanic poetic tradition. From traditional poems to García Lorca’s *Romancero gitano* and Rubén Blades’ lyrics, Gaylord follows the prodigious adaptability of a form that allows storytelling, social commentary, the sharing of information, and the expression of emotion.

Moving from the realm of politics to that of spirituality, Andrew Bush’s meditation, and we use that term in “en buen sentido de la palabra” (with apologies to Machado), turns from the public to the intimate and exposes a side of poetry that lives underground, especially in criticism. He provides a way of rethinking poetic discourse that entails a resacralization of the personal, putting forth a concept of intimacy that is to be applied both to the poem and to the reader. Bush marks a trajectory of dialogues on aesthetics and religious thought, and weaves together strands from the Talmud, Giorgio Agamben, Miguel de Unamuno, María Zambrano, and Clara Janés. In doing this, he touches upon several urgent matters: dialogue and dialogism, reality and the search for the ideal, word and literature, intimacy and love. The subtle reflections and the powerful prose of this article intuitively summarize much of the qualms of our two colloquia, while it also engages in conversation with other scholars and the traditions they represent.

His presentation illuminates in an unexpected and startlingly intense fashion the ideas embedded in many of the studies, especially Noel’s and Bosteels’. He underscores the possibility of border crossings that occur because of poetry—writing, reading, thinking, experiencing—, some of which are easily trespassed, and others which demand risking injury from linguistic and, at times, material barbed wire. Bush follows poetry’s way back into the Republic. This type of poetry also underpins the goals that Quance explores in Lorca’s verse and that Moreno finds in the visionary poets, namely, the pursuit of a profound knowing of the other that builds a community of spirit larger than that of the solitary individual. These communities are different from the *criollo* class of colonial Peru studied by Barbón or the nation-states examined by Kirkpatrick—but all are related, for both the recovery of ruins (discussed by Kirkpatrick) and the ephemeral *tarjas* (unearthed by Barbón’s archival research) are driven by an inspirational discourse. Similarly, Clayton and Olea, while presenting the frus-

trations of Oquendo and Gironde, on one hand, and the first Borges, on the other, reveal the poets' struggles to reach beyond the limits of knowledge, language, and self. At the end of this introduction, we will return to this idea and to how poetry provides access to intimacy and moral insight.

Intimacy as a primary condition for poetic utterance reappears in different ways in the studies by Bosteels, Eire, and Olea. Bruno Bosteels looks into the influence between two poets (Guillermo Carnero and María Victoria Atencia) who embody two traditions within the same period of time. The first stems from the romantic and symbolist paradigm, and the second from a trend directed towards the quotidian, that is, the experience of the mundane and the material. Ana Eire explores another facet of this second kind of modern poetry. In her study of Miguel d'Ors' work, Eire points out the way life, ideology, and poetry fuse into poetic reconfiguration of everyday concerns, language, and images. Rafael Olea Franco examines Borges and the way in which the fields of written and oral traditions converge in a specific use of Argentine idiomatic expressions.

A thread that runs through each of these essays is the critic's attempt to find a new and meaningful way of relating poetry to history, both social and literary: one that would expose the profound links between the engaged life and poetic discourse. Our contributors and the poets they chose to write about underscore the desire to reinsert poetry into contemporaneous discussions about the bond of the intimate and the political. If hybridization, identity politics, the fall of hierarchies, and the body and its representation have come to define our times, nothing seems more foreign than lyric poetry and its ostensible emphasis on aesthetics and linguistic play. If the nineteenth century saw the rise of history as "episteme," during the twentieth century narrative prose disputed history's privilege over truth, veracity, and knowledge of the past. Prose exploited its power of fabling, its inclusive and polemic polyphony, the depth and breadth of its generic agility in order to render visible the assumptions that had granted history its domination. As Carlos Fuentes noted more than forty years ago in his *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*, the "new novel" answered history by drawing upon literature's poetic roots. He makes his point quoting Octavio Paz, who wrote: "poemas y mitos coinciden en transmutar el tiempo en una categoría temporal especial, un pasado siempre futuro y siempre dispuesto a ser presente, a *presentarse*." Fuentes goes on to note, "No es fortuito que estas palabras del poeta mexicano se den en el contexto de su extraordinario discurso sobre Claude Lévi-Straus: al inventar o recuperar una mitología,

la novela se acerca cada vez más a la poesía y a la antropología” (20). Yet poetry has, for the most part, taken a back seat to prose on lists of bestsellers and of required reading for classes and advanced degrees. These essays seek to recover the centrality of the poetic vision, its ability to reveal what is profoundly real. These essays assert poetry’s ability to proclaim intimate, public, and transcendental truths.

Of the many insights found in the essays of this collection, one in particular foregrounds the claim that poetry and history go hand-in-hand, and that the lyric has never abandoned political life. Mary Gaylord writes about the *romance’s* “horizontal imagination,” a term she uses to denote that “any and all voices are permitted, in principle, to lay claim to the dramatic foreground.” While epic poetry has become scarce (unless we think of *Piedra de sol* or *Canto general* as forms of the epic) and dramatic poetry seems to recede after Lorca’s genius inclusion of poetry in plays, lyric poetry (and its popular embodiments from hip-hop to country music and latino songs) remains the venue from which the individual gives shape to what is lived and perceived intimately. It remains that pivotal space that reveals the impact of the historical and political on the anonymous and faceless member of a constantly shifting community. It remains the voice of those who aspire to make sense of the global on a personal and spiritual plane.

Spontaneously and serendipitously, the relationship between the intimate and the political, the personal and the historical became a thematic undercurrent, an exciting conceptual thread in most of the contributions in this volume. The different essays touch upon poetry as the discursive link between the subject and the world, the voice and its others, always in relation to normative social restrictions. For some of the authors, intimacy is a critical perspective (Bush, Bosteels); in other cases, it informs their analysis thematically (Eire, Moreno, Quance). Intimacy involves an interpellation, not a mere reading that joins together the text and the reader (Noel, Olea); finally, as the other face of history, poetic intimacy reveals the complexities of enthusiasm and resentment as social affects (Barbón).

In her essay, “En la era de la intimidad” (“In the Era of Intimacy”), Argentine scholar Nora Catelli affirms:

Lo subjetivo, la vivencia, la experiencia encarnada en la confesión o el testimonio expresan esa medida común de veracidad que el discurso propone y que sólo puede traducirse, como figura de la interioridad, en lo íntimo, transformado en prueba de

una certeza que se basa en la fiabilidad textual de su localización y, al mismo tiempo, de manera contradictoria, en la convicción de su inaccesibilidad existencial.

Este valor de veracidad posee alcances limitados: en lo íntimo no reside la verdad de la Historia, sino la vía –hoy privilegiada– para comprender la Historia como síntoma. (9)

It is due to the relation of truthfulness–“veracidad”–to history that intimacy becomes a key concept for Catelli in order to understand narrative genres such as confession or testimony. In these cases the intimate coincides with a tracing of the self, and finding in the subject a proof of what happened. As opposed to historical discourse, in which time and the event fuel narration, in the discursive genres that Catelli examines the individual is the core of the occurrence. Historicity springs out of the position the individual holds as an agent, a witness, a victim in the event. In these circumstances, the fact that the subject of the testimony or the confession claims a part in history is the crucial point in the convergence of the public and the private spheres. This is because identity is negotiated on the common ground where identity performance becomes a question of honesty, understanding, and spirituality, in Catelli’s terms. In this space, the presence of the Other is specular: alterity exists as a backdrop. The focus of discourse is the self in its relation to the unfolding of time by way of responsibility. In testimonial and confessional texts, this concept is related to the future under the pledge of “let the past not be repeated” and “let justice be done for those in absentia” (the victims). In these cases, the Other is also theatrical: s/he acts as part of an exchange in which the witness puts forward her testimony following the traces of a personal agency lost in the Other’s annihilation. While this way of approaching intimacy seems viable for testimonial and fictional prose, lyric poetry’s distance from history–time unfolding, transformation, plot, teleology–, requires a different approach to the tension between public and private, exteriority and intimacy, identity and alterity.

The relationship between the self and the other that is stressed by most of our contributors goes against both the postmodern aesthetics of identity, as depicted in the rhetoric of testimony and confession, and Romanticism’s legacy of visionary perspectivism as the axis of lyric expression and comprehension. Modern poetry and current readings of poetry from earlier times show a particular interest in revealing the importance of other perspectives, instances, and characters in shaping first-person poetic utterances and experiences. The essays of this collection manifest that, for poetry, alterity is the ground on which the

voice realizes the need to sing. In a movement that goes constantly from the emotional realm of empathy to that of inquiry and vice versa, the individual voice shapes the Other and is shaped by her/him in the space of intimacy and because of it.

Although poetry has testified over the centuries to the intimate experience of communication with others, and even to the difficult confluence between the inner world of the existential experience and society, the claim of intimacy made by the individual throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries appears to push critics and readers toward a more radical approach to the topic, that is, one that must confront history. Curiously enough, the essays in this volume seem to answer, each in its own terms and ways, this call or conundrum: how to read poetry in a world of passionate, caring, and responsible citizens.

BY WAY OF DETOUR: A FEW FINAL WORDS

“Poetry deserves to die,” is the verdict of a young, irreverent, and drunk poet, in the Korean film *Poetry* (2010) that tells the story of a woman in her old age, drawn to the outmoded and sentimental desire to write poetry. At the end of the movie, Mija Yang writes a poem, fulfilling the task assigned by the teacher of the workshop she attends. The protagonist’s creation is a dramatic monologue in two voices, her own and that of a young girl. With hardly any words, a constant use of stills, and a sorrowfully realistic cinematography that creates tension between form and content, the director, Lee Chang-dong, tells a story in which the most tragic facts are understated: gang rape and suicide. At the same time, the audience follows Mija Yang’s pursuit of poetry, words, images, and truth. She finds inspiration in nature, colors, flowers, and the taste of ripe apricots.

With very few words, *Poetry* is a twofold adventure:¹ the first is the old woman’s intense aesthetic pursuit, and the second is the ethical struggle with the crime of her grandson. Each path has its narrative line; nonetheless, at the end, as Yang’s hold on language is ever more tenuous, her writing reveals a cat-

¹ It is worth noting that the movie won first prize for best screenplay in the Cannes International Film Festival.

egorical imperative and the two narrative lines culminate in “Agnes’s Song.” The poem is an answer to the questions about the relation between experience and words, shedding light on how memory and oblivion materialize in a single text made of life and poetry, personal story and the story of others, intimacy beyond experience, love beyond personal attachment. Though neither the movie nor the poem explicitly specifies details, they both suggest another kind of justice: namely, the one offered by one human being to another in the form of empathy in the most intimate of communications.

In a couple of moments within the film, the director raises questions about how and where experience and poetry can come together. One such moment is when the grandmother goes into the fields to see the girl’s mother, a widowed farmer. After a candid conversation about the harvest, the beauty and hardships of life, the old lady walks away with a look of horror in her eyes. Why is she horrified after the encounter with Agnes’ mother? Because she spoke in poetic terms about beauty while horror was lurking? Because she realized that the reason why she was there—to offer money in exchange for the mother’s silence—was an offense as immense as the rape itself?

The second moment revolves around Mija Yang’s denunciation of her grandson for his part in Agnes’ rape. Is Mija Yang distraught because she has discovered the destructive power of words? Because there is no poetic way to tell this story? Because the intimacy that she has achieved with Agnes through poetry makes the terrifying decision inevitable?

Poetry answers the question regarding the correspondence of life and art in terms of representation and responsibility under a very particular light: the loss of language and identity. Certainly, the poem does not recount or even allude to the facts—rape, despair, and suicide. Neither does the movie, although it evolves out of Agnes’ death and eventually shows the grandson’s arrest. The conclusion, however, appears to emphasize another kind of justice: the one offered by one human being to another in the form of empathy in the most intimate of communications.

The poem captures the old woman’s experience of otherness, which the movie, as it follows her from a visit to the hospital to her annihilation, leaves in the shadow. This untold and unfathomable story is Agnes’ silenced tale. Poetry—the search for beauty, as the teacher defines it—leads Mija Yang to an intimate place—to her soul, in the teacher’s words. In this space, she finds who Agnes was, and what her short life tells her about her own and that of others. The old woman steps up to an emotional space, that of the final poem, without

overshadowing Agnes. Rather, they both illuminate one another's lives and deaths through mutual presence and translation of experiences. This explains the fact that the text turns progressively into a love poem, where the two voices quench their thirst for intimacy in each other's presence.

Tragedy, beauty, and a deeply uniting experience between two human beings unfold amidst triviality, humiliation, fear, extortion, doubt, personal interest, the multifaceted violence of electronic games and karaoke, lower class living conditions in an Oriental hyper-capitalist country, where youth is lost and peasants impoverished. This is the setting in which a dying art, poetry, manages to speak up. Poetry is presence beyond presence and life beyond the living; it bespeaks the courage of saying, in any circumstances and at any risk.

Agnes's Song

[in the voice of Mija Yang]

How is it over there?
 How lonely is it?
 Is it still glowing red at the sunset?
 Are the birds still singing on the way to the forest?
 Can you receive the letter I dared not send?
 Can I convey
 the confession I dared not make?
 Will time pass and roses fade?
 Now it's time to say goodbye
 Like the wind that hinged and then goes,
 just like shadows
 To promises that never came
 to the love sealed till the end

[In the voice of a young girl]

To the grass kissing my weary ankles
 And to the tiny footsteps following me
 It's time to say goodbye
 Now as darkness falls
 Will a candle be lit again?
 Here I pray
 nobody shall cry
 and for you to know
 how deeply I loved you
 The long wait in the middle of a hot summer day
 An old path resembling my father's face

Even the lonesome wild flower shyly turning away
How deeply I loved
How my heart fluttered at hearing your faint song
I bless you
Before crossing the black river
With my soul's last breath
I am beginning to dream
a bright sunny morning
again I awake blinded by the light
and meet you
standing by me.