The City as Organizing Principle in Twenty-First-Century Luso-Hispanic Studies

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RESPONSE

The Pedagogy and Politics of Twenty-First-Century Luso-Hispanic Urban Cultural Studies

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Hispania 100.5 (2017): 137–44
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Abstract: Luso-Hispanic studies has responded ambivalently to the commonplace that the globe has passed the tipping point of urbanization. While disciplinary traditionalism poses challenges to scholars linking artistic production to urban contexts, interdisciplinary work on the city has nonetheless found terrain in which to thrive. This brief article thus explores the recent history and future potential of urban directions in Luso-Hispanic scholarship with an eye toward twenty-first-century academic shifts. These urban directions are a sign of increased interdisciplinarity within language and literature fields at the same time that they are a catalyst for social scientists to embrace literary forms of culture.

Keywords: cities/ciudades, conferences/conferencias, cultural studies/estudios culturales, interdisciplinarity/interdisciplinariedad, publications/publicaciones, textbooks/libros de texto, the urban/lo urbano

Introduction

One of the great sea changes of the twenty-first century in humanistic disciplines involves their increasing connection to the social sciences. High-profile and public scholarly arguments regarding interdisciplinarity from some fifty years ago still resonate in our contemporary academic landscape (Collini 1993; Kagan 2009; Leavis 1972; Snow 1993). Key among the many paths toward interdisciplinarity that Language and Literature fields have taken is one that privileges specific urban areas as the crossroads for connecting artistic, cultural, literary, filmic, political, economic, sociological, geographical, and anthropological concerns. We need not look too far to see how Luso-Hispanic studies is organized around urban centers in Europe and Latin America.

The first section of this concise article explores the current state of urban scholarship in Luso-Hispanic studies, documenting a trend in existing monographs, rooting that trend in key moments from the 1980s and 1990s, and tying interest in cities to methodological shifts in the discipline. The second section goes beyond the production of scholarship with an urban focus to look at the current and future opportunities to organize publishing, textbooks, conferences and teaching around cities of the Luso-Hispanic world. In the end, the digital humanities also lend themselves to reinforcing this urban paradigm through the creation of multilayered digital cities projects.

Luso-Hispanic Scholarship

The twenty-first century will see a progressive urbanization of both humanities and social science scholarship, and Luso-Hispanic studies will be no exception. As a characterization of this growing trend—though not meant as an exhaustive nor geographically representative list—I offer the following context. An increasing number of significant studies published within
Hispanic studies over the last two decades employ such urban centers as a way of organizing interdisciplinary approaches to culture in a broad sense. In Spain, for example, critics have focused on Segovia (McGrath 2012), Madrid (Baker 1991, 2009; Baker and Comptello 2003; Frost 2008; Haidt 2011; Larson 2011; Parsons 2003; Ramos 2010; Ricci 2009; Ugarte 1996), Barcelona (Epps 2002; Illas 2013; Resina 2008), or some combination of the latter two (B. Fraser 2011, 2015a; Mercer 2012). In Latin America, the number of studies of Buenos Aires (Chamorro 2011; Foster; H. Fraser 1987; Garth 2005; Page 2009; Podalsky 2004) is plentiful and one can find instances of scholarly work on Rio de Janeiro (Carvalho 2013; M. Conde 2011), multiple cities (Holmes 2007), or even the appearance of Paris in Hispanic narrative (Schwartz 1999). These are merely examples.

If we reflect upon the recent past, it is clear that the 1980s and 1990s serve as anchors for such contemporary interest in urban themes. In particular it is useful to link rising literary interest in the urban experience with three events: from 1982, 1983 and 1984, respectively. The year 1982 saw the publication of Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, which brought an urban Marxism to bear on Anglophone literary production. This important work was digested not merely by English department scholars but by Language and Literature fields across the board. In fact, two days in late October, 1983—at the ninth annual Hispanic literature conference on “Los escritores y la experiencia de la ciudad moderna”—twenty-eight Luso-Hispanic scholars presented a series of original and quite novel papers on the city. And Ángel Rama’s oft-cited work *La ciudad letrada* was first published in 1984. This interest in the urban experience was further stimulated, for example, by the English translations of Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, by Steven Rendall in 1988, and Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, by Donald Nicholson-Smith in 1991. Looking backward from today’s perspective, there is no shortage of scholarly landmarks from the 1980s and 90s to which contemporary urban cultural studies can link.

Even without an understanding of such landmarks, this turn toward the urban in Language and Literature fields seems simple enough on its face. It may be explained by the brute fact that our world is increasingly urban. As of 2007, the majority of the globe’s population lives in cities. Recalling a now classic statement by Louis Wirth written in 1938, David Harvey remarks in *Rebel Cities* (2012) that “[t]hough there are plenty of residual spaces in the global economy where the process is far from complete, the mass of humanity is thus increasingly being absorbed within the ferments and cross-currents of urbanized life” (xv). People are continuing to move to urban areas, and urban forms of life are spreading even to rural areas—a general shift that goes by the name of urbanization and that has been explored in great poetic, material, and theoretical detail through writings dating back at least a century (see B. Fraser 2015b). But in scholarly (i.e., methodological) terms, the underpinnings of this trend toward the urban are a bit more nuanced.

First, the digestion of cultural studies methods by Luso-Hispanic studies as a whole has played a major role. The intent to give equal weight to art and society (the “project” and the “formation” in the words of Raymond Williams) has resulted in approaches to literature that link text and context more systematically than had been done in the past. Putting aside, for one moment, the difficult and intriguing matter of what is meant by cultural studies—a question that may have as many answers as respondents—there should be no question that our approaches to literature have diversified considerably since the 1960s. Whether these approaches employ Williams’s definition of cultural studies or not, the result in all cases has been to cross the borders of the text and move more concertedly toward larger issues of social cultural production and embodied reception.

Second—not unrelated to the first, but I think distinguishable for our purposes here—our operative notions of how the cultural product to be analyzed is defined have changed. Since 1917 when *Hispania* was first published we have experienced a progressive move away from traditional understandings that largely limited analysis to literature in its prose, poetic and dramatic forms. While narrative, poetry, and theater continue to be bedrocks of our discipline, it is increasingly
difficult to identify scholars who do not also include film, music, graphic novels, popular culture, cultural practices and/or collective imaginaries in their work.

Third, along with the development of cultural studies approaches and an expansion of how cultural production is defined, we must also admit the progressive interdisciplinarity of Luso-Hispanic studies. Much more so than in the past, our published work culls insights from specific disciplinary traditions, whether those are anthropology, geography, health sciences, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, or sociology, for example. This is true whether one looks at articles published in journals, chapters that form part of edited volumes, or monographs appearing in book series. Moreover, many of our colleagues today situate their work within a wider interdisciplinary field—disability studies, gender and sexuality studies, migration/mobility studies, science fiction studies, and of course urban studies—staking out a vantage point from which to speak about Luso-Hispanic culture in particular, but often times culture as defined globally, transnationally, or in relation to areas that might fall outside of even the most inclusive definition of our shared discipline’s linguistic and cultural foci.

In truth, each of these three methodological shifts in our field are intertwined, and all are deeply relevant for understanding why cities are fast becoming an organizing principle for Luso-Hispanic studies. As my own research in urban cultural studies has attempted to demonstrate for humanities scholars, cities are an organizing principle that can fuse with other interdisciplinary fields that allow scholars to move beyond traditional notions of literature to include other cultural products, and that promote a cultural studies method by linking urban art forms with urban society.

Publishing, Conferences, Teaching, Textbooks, Digital Humanities

Moving beyond the scholarly concerns of research content and method, cities hold great potential for bringing scholars together into a shared dialogue. One possible critique of our academic landscape regards the increased fragmentation of perspectives on Luso-Hispanic culture. Scholars may be doing similar work but not seeing each other’s research as relevant. For example, one may be looking at early twentieth-century Argentine dictatorship through a contemporary film, and another may be looking at that same early twentieth-century Argentine dictatorship through less-recent poetry. One may use a gender studies framework for analyzing a nineteenth-century Brazilian novel, and another may approach that same nineteenth-century Brazilian novel through its resonance with a philosophical issue. One may use a political economy approach to a medieval manuscript on the Iberian peninsula, and another may use a political economy approach to an early-modern manuscript mentioning that same location on the Iberian peninsula. The distance seemingly produced by the distinction in form of cultural product, in method/approach, or in time period, may seem to be irreconcilable to one or more of the hypothetical pairs mentioned. Seeing the article pairs as work on Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, or on Madrid, however, potentially changes the perspective. In the rich tradition of urban studies, cities are, after all, defined by difference. They have the potential to bring together all manner of seemingly disparate work for researchers who specialize in a common location.

In publishing, it is clear that the rise and future interdisciplinary potential of urban-centered work is bringing literature, film, and cultural production as a whole into contact with social science perspectives on cities of the Luso-Hispanic world. It is important to note that new book series and new journals with a robust editorial presence from Hispanic studies scholars are creating outlets for such work—as a complement to urban-centered studies published here and there in general journals, including Hispania. Outside of Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian studies, well-regarded institutions are embracing this interdisciplinary urban paradigm in the formation of new centers, programs and research clusters. Conferences in our own field could follow suit in their organization. It is not uncommon, in the twenty-first century, to see individual presentations on urban themes and even panels on cities listed on the programs of
numerous regional, national and international conferences in our home discipline. Will there be a Luso-Hispanic cities conference in the near future boasting divisions for the research that has unfolded to date on La Habana, São Paolo, and Madrid? Or perhaps a conference drawing scholars from multiple fields to discuss a given city in all of its interdisciplinary complexity?

In our teaching, it has helped many of us to sculpt classes around cities, now seen as containers for all manner of linguistic issues, cultural products, temporal conflicts, and converging methodological approaches. Consider how well an undergraduate class on “Barcelona” would attract students, or how well a graduate class on art in Mexico City seen across time and genre could train future professors in the nuances of different cultural forms, methodological approaches and variations of textual analysis. By and large, however, textbooks in our discipline have not followed suit. In point of fact, lower- and mid-level textbooks remain moored in a nationalistic paradigm. In Hispanic studies, at least, textbooks regularly isolate Spain, Mexico, Argentina, and Cuba, for example, reaffirming through their structure, if not also their message, the myth that nations are bounded and internally homogenous with a shared culture that is continuous through time.

Moreover, a hallmark of interdisciplinary research and education in the twenty-first century needs to be its digital resonance. Aware of the opportunities offered by digital humanities approaches, we must admit, too, the potential of digital city projects to speak to interdisciplinary concerns. The currency afforded to practices of thick mapping and deep maps (Bodenhamer et al. 2015, Presner et al. 2014) provide a real incentive to form collaborative partnerships that cross, for example, Luso-Hispanic studies with history, geographic information systems, computer science, and digital art/animation. As with digital humanities approaches in general, digital city projects can synthesize research and teaching. Projects can be co-created by students who collaborate with faculty to create narrative, audio, and video for DH projects; these projects can be turned around and used in subsequent classes as a source of information for learners, even as a textbook of sorts. In expanding and revising such projects over time, these projects may also galvanize cross-disciplinary interests as well as communities external to university structures.

In the end, however, it is the urban as a cohesive and communitarian paradigm that breathes life into all of these aspects of our shared field. As Louis Wirth wrote in 1938,

The influences which cities exert upon the social life of man are greater than the ratio of the urban population would indicate, for the city is not only in ever larger degrees the dwelling-place and the workshop of modern man, but it is the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that has drawn the most remote parts of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and activities into a cosmos.

The lessons long inherent to urban studies scholarship—and to which Luso-Hispanic studies scholars themselves have gravitated while moving toward this interdisciplinary area—teach us that the urban is defined by heterogeneity, diversity, difference, multiplicity, conflict, struggle, and even dissent. Accepting the city as an organizing principle does not elide the very real differences of method, of theoretical ground, or of form of artistic production with which our shared field must grapple—it merely provides a pretext for considering each of these differences in relation to the others. The opportunity here is for Luso-Hispanic studies to lead the twenty-first-century shift toward seeing knowledge, as in Henri Lefebvre’s own urban thinking, as an interdisciplinary totality.

NOTES

1 In fact, using JSTOR’s “Data for Research” (DfR) tool one can perform a text-mining analysis of all Hispania issues going back to 1917, searching for the term “urban” with this result (results reported here are from the period spanning 1919–2012): the years with the highest relevant article count were 1992 (24 articles), 1984 (20), 2008 (20), 1978 (19), and 1985 (19).
2 Edited by Cruz Mendizábal and sponsored by the Spanish section of the Foreign Languages Department at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the proceedings of that conference were assembled in a 377-page packet with black plastic spiral binding and a green cardstock cover. Contributors to that volume were: Alborg, Anderson, Angerosa, Brown, David Conde, Donoso, Eberle McCarthy, Espadas, Forbes, Fraser, Keenan, Lamson, Lichtblau, Moreiras, Mujica, Muncy, Murray, Ordóñez, Ouimette, Oyola, Pérez, Taño Manning, Sears, Shirley, Sims, Soberón, Varona-Lacey, and Vilarós.

3 Such outlets explicitly devoted to urban research include the *Hispanic Urban Studies* book series with Palgrave Macmillan, the *Journal of Latin American Urban Studies*, and the *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies*, all of which boast faculty from Hispanic Studies on their editorial boards. Recent urban special sections have appeared also in the *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* and the *International Journal of Iberian Studies*, among others.

4 For example, University of Cincinnati; New York University; University College London; London School of Economics; University of Pennsylvania; University of California, Santa Cruz; University of California, Berkeley; and the Technical University of Berlin. What remains to be investigated, however, is the degree to which these programs integrate humanities methods into their curricula.

5 See, for example, the Modern Languages Association, the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, the Kentuckey Foreign Language Conference, the Mountain Interstate Foreign Language Conference, the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, the Popular Culture Association, in addition to the American Association of Geographers conference, whose membership is beginning to integrate humanities topics with greater regularity.

6 This structure tends to cater to a largely but not exclusively Anglocentric understanding of global tourism, thus ignoring historical and contemporary transatlantic crossings as well as the diversity to be found within national borders and identities. It is reasonable, too, to suggest that the national vantage point of textbooks is tied to the national perspective that may still be embedded in departmental curricula.

7 Here I invoke Lefebvre's distinction between the urban and the city, replicated in the work of Delgado Ruiz.

WORKS CITED


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Keywords: capitalism/capitalismo, cultural studies/estudios culturales, pedagogy/pedagogía, space/espacio, urban studies/estudios urbanos

Since the 1980s Anglo-American scholars in the field of Luso-Hispanic Studies have had plenty of time to think through the so-called “spatial turn” that built disciplinary bridges between the Humanities and the Social Sciences. It took approximately 20 years for key texts written in French (those of Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, for example) to be translated into English and work their way into the field. One example of such a text is “Of Other Spaces,” (a 1967 lecture of Foucault’s that was not published in English until 1984) on the everyday experience of space, where he explains that

[t]he present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. (22)

Foucault’s ideas about space had such an impact on academics in many disciplines because he explained that space was neither a mere empty container nor a backdrop for events and actions (see Tally). Rather, as Benjamin Fraser reminds us in his essay above and in much of his work on Henri Lefebvre, space is at the same time a product and a creative process. It produces each one of us, in fact, through a complex network of economic, political, social and cultural forces.

Fredric Jameson (2001) subsequently took this concept of the spatial and used it to better explain the culture of late modernism, calling on cultural critics to rethink these specialized geographical and cartographic issues in terms of social space, in terms, for example, of social class and national or international context, in terms of the ways in which we all necessarily also cognitively map our individual social relationship to local, national and international class realities. (585–86)

If Jameson wasn’t exactly celebrating the postmodern in his *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he acknowledges that its combination of high and low culture forced us to stop thinking of art as autonomous like many of the artists and cultural critics of the Modern period tended to do. Jameson encouraged us to get our hands dirty—to “abolish all sort of critical distance” (580). Jameson called this an “aesthetic of cognitive mapping—a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” (586, emphasis mine). Much of the recent history and future potential of urban and spatial directions in Luso-Hispanic scholarship that Benjamin Fraser outlines in his essay...
is the inevitable outcome of this spatial turn. These philosophies of space from decades ago and this call of Jameson’s to a “pedagogical political culture” are at the heart of how many of us now think about how language, image, sound and all other possible systems of meaning can and should be understood in our scholarship and should be taught in our classrooms.

Urban studies and the broader spatial turn have given literary critics, film scholars and linguists in Luso-Hispanic Studies the tools to better connect the complex workings of written, visual and spoken systems of meaning to social life. It’s given us the inspiration to get our hands dirty. I strongly suspect that this has happened in no small part as a response to some of the pedagogical realities we currently face. We can’t ignore that our students themselves are inherently interdisciplinary. In Luso-Hispanic studies the vast majority of our students are double-majors or minors with no intent to pursue their studies in the Humanities. As professors we’ve had to let go of aesthetic practices and values elaborated on the basis of historical situations and elitist dilemmas which are no longer ours (if they ever were). Cognitive mapping forces us to consider the real world in which we and our students live and how to best prepare them to understand where they are located as individual subjects in a global system and the role of language in how these systems are produced. The fact that literary studies and indeed the book itself have been revolutionized by digital culture, the national literary canon is a quaint relic and even the feature-length film as created for public viewing in the space of the movie theater is a dying art, all demand that we find new ways of explaining why our field matters. Talking about space has and will continue to allow us to find new and revolutionary ways of doing just that.

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