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Hispanism and Its *Disciplina*

Margaret Greer
Duke University

Considering the invitation to participate in a discussion of “the state of our disciplines within the American university,” I fixed on the plural, “disciplines.” Presumably, the sense of the term intended is straight forward, that of discipline as a field of study or learning, such as history, literature, anthropology, politics or economics. I suspect, however, that other meanings that have evolved from the Latin root *disciplina*, “teaching or learning,” trouble our current sense of our fields of study within and beyond Hispanism, a point to which I will return.

Thinking from my current vantage point as Chair of Romance Studies at Duke, the metaphor that seems best to describe the nature of Hispanism in the American university system is that of a family; an extended, vigorous, and mature family. I do not offer this as a sanguinely rose-colored vision of essential unity, nor as its polar opposite; that of a critically dysfunctional family, but as a working metaphor useful in understanding both the ties that bind us together and the differences that pull us apart. It is not an organic but rather a queered family, an assemblage partly inherited, partly chosen, and a site for the operation of *disciplina* in its various senses.

Let me take first the questions of maturity and size, the extension of our “family.” As we all know, until well past mid-twentieth century, Hispanism was unquestionably the cadet line within the disciplines in which it had been granted legitimacy, which were few. History departments began to include at least a token Latin American historian



several decades ago, but despite (or perhaps because of) Spain's importance as the first global empire, its dominance of sixteenth-century Europe and its current vitality, far too many departments leave whatever coverage of Spain occurs to European generalists. In Political Science, Anthropology, and other social sciences, the situation is similar, with appropriately greater attention to Latin America (which is, after all, a continent of great diversity) and little if any to Spain. In the language and literature field, changes in the balance of power and cultural legitimacy produced institutional restructuring and renaming, as German-dominated Modern Language departments were succeeded by French-dominant Romance Language and Literature departments. They in turn split into Spanish and Portuguese and French and Italian programs as interest in Spanish programs outpaced French, first in the West and Southwest where large Hispanic populations made the importance of Spanish evident, and then nationwide. Some argue that Spanish should, in fact, no longer be considered a "foreign" language, but a second domestic tongue. At Duke, for example, where the first professor in Spanish was only hired in 1920, the Spanish language program now equals the size of all other languages combined. That growth in itself is a mixed blessing. Our size occasions resentment from smaller programs, which are wont to complain of a new kind of Spanish imperialism. More significantly, the influx of language students strains our resources and, given the bottom-line mentality of most university administrations, demands a constant struggle with budget-cutters, a creative faculty to convert reluctant language learners into majors and majors into graduate students, and a visibly vigorous research agenda to fend off reduction to a service department. Interdisciplinary projects and joint appointments play an important role in Romance Studies at Duke in supporting our claim to function as a transcultural crossroads of the humanities.

Our diversity. Since I write as the Thanksgiving holidays approach, the image that springs to mind is that of a family grown too large to fit around the extended dinner table, whose younger members find themselves seated at makeshift card tables where they are alternatively tempted to vent their displeasure with surreptitious digs at their similarly disadvantaged siblings, or to join forces in protest against the stodgy elders at the main table who expect them to keep in their place. In recent decades, the new arrivals confined in at least some institutions to the equivalent of the card table have been feminism, Latino studies and queer studies. Cultural studies might have made up the fourth side of the table, but its broad appeal charmed it fairly quickly to the main table, albeit with continuing protests from some traditionalists who think that our disciplinary identity and appreciation



for “literature” are undermined by this unruly offspring. Given the extension of the Spanish empire, the experience with colonialism and its aftereffects have made postcolonial or de-colonial studies a crucial presence that vies for a central position.

We can also populate a second card table with Hispano-Islamic, Hispano-Judaic, Basque, and Catalán studies—with the latter protesting that given its Romance language status, it should not be seated with these “interlopers”. While all of these family members bear a more or less genealogical relationship to the Iberian parent, however encouraged by non-Hispanist trends, can and should the same be said of Iberia’s transatlantic relatives, unwillingly incorporated five centuries ago? Compelling as I consider the importance of including at our table the study of Nahuatl, Quechua, and Mayan languages and cultures, for example, those of us who work in Romance Studies departments confront colleagues who argue that such inclusion dilutes or betrays our own identity, and that those languages and cultures should be studied in departments of Cultural Anthropology. To this mix, we then add the equivalent of relatives by intellectual marriage in our interdisciplinary age of joint appointments and alliances with comparative literature, history, cultural anthropology, music, art and art history, philosophy, political science, and to the equally diverse family of critical theory.

Aside from the stresses on our time and energy posed by this complex web of relations, they do raise the issue of our “disciplinary” identity and legitimacy. Its nature was relatively easy to define in past eras, when language and literature departments felt themselves still firmly rooted in philology, or in literary history, or linguistics, or even in mid-twentieth century formalist criticism, with its devotion to close readings of a relatively stable set of canonical literary texts. (A similar disciplinary clarity pertained, or is nostalgically felt to have pertained, in the social sciences, prior to the still-disputed “linguistic turn” in those fields.) None of those scholarly endeavors are to be disdained; they do and will continue to constitute important parts of how we understand and teach texts, even when we extend our close reading skills to a much wider range of cultural products than those defined since the nineteenth century as “literature.”

Today, however, aside from our own possible humility or discomfort when “poaching” in another field for which we were not trained, we are often made most aware of our own disciplinary identity in the negative, in debates with scholars from other branches of study. Historians, for example, tend to accuse literary and cultural studies scholars of being wildly speculative, while we chaff at some of them for naturalizing rather than acknowledging the effects of their own narrative



practice, or being too obsessed with factual evidence, or lacking in imagination. I consider those cross-disciplinary debates—in the interdisciplinary grounding of an individual study or in collaborative projects--the most interesting and one of the most productive of our educational endeavors. Human thought and experience and the problems posed by the human condition have never been contained within the narrow boxes of scholarly disciplines, however carefully we divide them into separate strands for purposes of investigation and analysis.

The established disciplines are, of course, within Hispanism as without, the result of an organized dissection of knowledge into discrete fields and paths of inquiry, subdivided into ever more finite units of specialization. That is necessary in a complex universe. However, if we look at a second meaning of “discipline,” that of “a system of rules governing conduct or inquiry,” we approach its problematic use. We can say that those rules are just procedural, formal or informal rules of how we go about studying our object to yield reliable results. But that ignores another set of questions: Who sets the rules? Why? To whose benefit? Who determines that studying the evidence of Stoic philosophy in Calderón is legitimate, but tracing possible images of homosexuality in Cervantes, or Lorca, or Gabriela Mistral, is not? Who benefits and who loses if we teach Aymara and Andean narrative traditions to our Romance Studies students? The answers to those questions raise the vital issues of the geography of knowledge and the history of the hierarchies that have determined which knowledge counts and which is discounted.

There is yet a third meaning of “discipline” as “a corrective training of mental faculties or moral character.” If we focus on “corrective training of mental faculties,” most of us would agree that such is the value of theory in our field: a training that obliges us and our students to examine the unquestioned assumptions and ideological biases of our starting points, to recognize how the questions we ask and the methodologies we follow predetermine the results at which we arrive. The proclamation, a few years back, that we were in a post-theory phase is, in my estimation, either based on a misunderstanding of the nature and use of critical theory, or is an invitation to mental laziness. In my own field of early modern Peninsular studies, as I have said elsewhere, the ignorance or rejection of theory was for decades a cop-out by scholars who had never engaged in it at all, and who preferred the traditional designation of “Golden Age,” implicated as it is in the history of nationalism, the formulation of literary canons in nineteenth-century Spain, and a melancholic nostalgia for the era when Hapsburg kings ruled over a global empire. But the bitter disputes between followers of



different schools of theory can also point toward the unspoken sense of discipline as a training, not only of “mental faculties” but also of something closer to “moral character,” in which partisans of the rival school are judged to be deficient, and guilty of pursuing, or worse yet, leading their students to pursuing, investigations deemed to be useless or perverse. To critique the waste of intellectual energy in these disputes is not to invite a retreat to an unbounded relativism. We all know that theory has a history and that different theoretical approaches are more or less appropriate in different eras and the problems they pose. But I suggest that the desire for a unified field of theoretical coherence in the disciplines of Hispanism is an *objet a* of desire, an ever-receding object that promises to reassure us of the wholeness and soundness of our existence, if we could just secure it.

No coherent graduate or undergraduate program or research agenda can include the entire potential family of interests within Hispanism, but surely one of the benefits of our current size is that we can afford to invite all of them to find a place at one of our tables or another.

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