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Hispanists and University Presses

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Part one: *Cuesta arriba*

Suppose that you are—which most of us have been—a recent Ph.D. who has spent the last few years revising her or his doctoral dissertation to get it ready for publication. You’ve heard through the grapevine, or have been told by a senior colleague in your department, that to have a strong tenure case you need to have your book published by an American university press. “Imprint counts, you know,” he says, explaining that high-profile unipresses publish the work of all those English and History professors on your university’s tenure committee. Once your MS is ready or almost ready, you spend several weeks drafting a pithy letter of introduction and an elegant proposal that explains your book and touts its significance (in truth, it exaggerates it a little). Then you send your inquiry to fifteen or twenty university presses whose addresses you’ve gotten from the MLA directory. While your tenure clock ticks away, you wait for the replies. Slowly, they start to trickle in. After the first two or three, they all have a depressingly familiar ring: “Thank you for your letter. Although your manuscript sounds exciting indeed, it does not fit into our publishing plans at the moment. We wish you good luck in finding a suitable outlet for your work.” If you’re lucky, a couple of the presses to which you wrote will agree to evaluate your MS. If you’re very lucky, one of those two presses will publish your first book. If



you're not, you may have to resort to one of those "vanity" presses (a misnomer because it's not vanity but survival that motivates submissions) whose publication fee will set you back several years' worth of raises. Not for nothing is one of them called Juan de la Cuesta: *te cuesta*.

Five or ten years later, you have somehow managed to negotiate the tenure and promotion obstacle course. You have even made a name for yourself among your peers, and once again you are putting the finishing touches on another book manuscript. You go through the same drill that you did when you were younger, with the advantage that, after years of hanging out at the MLA book exhibit, you've gotten to meet a few unipress editors who seemed enthusiastic about your work. You put together a letter and proposal, decide on a sample chapter (the most theoretical), and write to the same fifteen or twenty unipresses. While your hair turns gray, you wait for replies. Oddly, none of your contacts come through—one has a huge backlog; the other no longer publishes on Hispanic topics. But, as before, you do get expressions of interest from two reputable presses. After anguishing for a while, you decide to play by the rules and not submit to both simultaneously. Off they go, the 90,000 words that caused you to neglect your spouse, forget the names of your children, and lose track of your favorite TV series. Two months later the 90,000 words come back to you—the return of the unipressed—with a two-paragraph letter saying that the manuscript is wonderful but too narrow in scope for its publication to be feasible. The editor suggests that you submit it to a monograph series on Latin American literature. Since your book is about Benito Pérez Galdós, you wonder how attentively the manuscript was read or how much your ex-editor-to-be knows about Hispanic writers. At this juncture, you have two career options: either you turn into deadwood (there are worse fates) or you become department chair.

Part two: *Cuesta abajo*

But what about those books that do get published? Since I don't want to F. Courtney Tarr everyone with the same brush, let me say at the outset that American university presses have published and continue to publish a great many fine and even indispensable books by Hispanists (though as of yet none by me). Having issued this disclaimer, let me now proceed to offend everyone (including myself).

The basic shortcoming of unipress books by Hispanists is that they are not written for the people who read them. Years ago Walter Ong published an influential essay entitled, "The Writer's Audience is

Always a Fiction.” Truer words were never written—to whom, I’m not sure, though they certainly apply to Hispanists. Perpetually in search of that elusive creature, the Wider Audience, whose capture will generate sales of 2000 rather than 200 copies of a book, unipress editors expect us to address people who don’t exist. I spent twenty years in a Romance Languages department and the only non-Hispanist books that my colleagues in French or Italian sometimes read were those by assistant professors in Spanish who were up for tenure. I served for five years on the Editorial Advisory Board of a prestigious unipress and never saw much evidence that my non-Hispanist colleagues (that is, everybody else on the Board) had a keen interest in projects in Spanish or Spanish-American literature. It is a unipress myth that if a book on a Hispanic topic is theoretical enough or broad enough, it will be bought and read by scholars and critics who are not Hispanists. Books by Hispanists, when they are bought at all, are bought by other Hispanists.

Nonetheless, the expectation that we pursue the Wider Audience has had some nefarious consequences for the writing that we do. Foremost among them, the odious practice of requiring translations for every single Spanish word in our books. This practice became compulsory in the early 1980s, at around the time that PMLA began demanding translations of foreign-language passages in the articles accepted for publication. Of course, the policy applies not only to Hispanists, though it is revealing that years after PMLA established its “English-also” rule, some unipresses were still publishing books about French literature without requiring the translation of quotations, as if Spanish—the second most widely read language in this country—were more foreign or arcane than its Romance cousin.

Harmless as it seems, the English-also hegemony has gone a long way toward spoiling the reading and writing of criticism. From the standpoint of the reader, English-also turns every page into the high hurdles, since it forces you to leap over bracket after bracket. If you are unwilling or unable to do that, your punishment is to have to read every quotation twice, once in each language. In addition to putting a damper on the pleasures of reading, either alternative dilutes the force and clarity of the argument you are trying to follow. From the writer’s standpoint, English-also induces you to quote less than you would like (who doesn’t want to produce a readable text? Who wants to deal with the drudgery of translating?). If you are one of those critics who writes from quotation to quotation, the disincentive to quote is salutary, but for the rest of us, who unlearned that habit in graduate school, the *de facto* quote quota creates an insidious distance between text and commentary. Indeed, English-also may be one of several reasons—and not the least important—for the



decline of close reading, which to me remains the fundamental form of engagement with works of literature. A close reading is not only a careful reading but an intimate one. Quotation marks are the arms with which we embrace the books we write about. Without sufficient quotation, text and critic remain strangers to each other, ships parsing in the night.

What is worse, the unipress editor could decide that, to save space, only the English translations will be included in your book, a decision that will make you rue the day you applied to graduate school. We all know how many sharp insights lose their point when the reference text is a translation, or how an artful paraphrase can set up a promising line of analysis, or how often our literal-minded translations make wonderful writing seem clumsy or ordinary. Even more important, the disparity between the critic's and the writer's languages produces a counterpoint of voices that not only prevents the writer from impinging unduly on the critic, but gives the critic the resources of other genres of bilingual writing: two lexicons, two sound systems, the possibility of interlingual give-and-take. How can we rave about bilingualism in the classroom but cave to monolingualism in our editor's office? Easy: butcher my MS, but give it the imprint.

The quest for the Wider Audience—an imagined community if there ever was one—has had another, equally undesirable, consequence. Since most Spanish and Spanish American authors still fall outside the unipress canon, what is likely to sell your book is the slant rather than the subject. This means that you have to devise a “theoretical frame” that allows your editor to make the kinds of extravagant claims for your book that s/he believes will attract the non-Hispanist reader. But a lot of theory, like a little learning, is a dangerous thing, especially when every page in your book features some variation of the formula: “Famous Theorist Fulanito says X about Y. This X can also be said of my Z.” Although these appeals are sometimes illuminating, in many instances only the gesture signifies. Two things: that since you've read the books that the Wider Audience finds significant, you deserve its attention; and that the work you are studying must have value because Famous Theorist Fulanito's insights can be read into or out of it.

In extreme cases, the emphasis on slant rather than subject ruins your book by turning it into something that it's not. Rather than a superb monograph, you produce a pretentious, overcooked treatise (the word, I think, is “intervention”) in which you strain to make large arguments out of small ones and scant the recalcitrant detail in favor of the unsound generality. And this book that should have taken you two years to write, took you ten.



My melancholy conclusion: the constraints imposed on us by unipresses have led to a watered-down Hispanism that is just as irrelevant as it always was to non-Hispanists but less useful than it should be to Hispanists. Instead of improving the quality of Hispanist scholarship, unipress publication has hurt it. Instead of making us better critics, it has made us predictable cross-over artists. Shakira or Amado Alonso—who would you rather be? *Todo cuesta*, as Rubén Blades sang in *Crossover Dreams*. But the price we pay for basking in the unipress limelight is too high.

Debating Hispanic Studies: Reflections on Our Disciplines. Ed. Luis Martín-Estudillo, Francisco Ocampo, and Nicholas Spadaccini. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 1.1 (2006): 87-91.

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