

Monolingualism of US Poetry: Language Barriers for Poetry in Spanish

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There is no doubt that there has been, on the part of United States literary canon, a growing acceptance of US Latinx voices. This trend has been made evident, for example, by the recent institutional recognition of contemporary poets such as Richard Blanco, Luis Felipe Herrera, and Martín Espada.¹ Also, in more in-depth historical approaches, Latino poetry in Spanish has been reclaimed by a small number of US anthologies that have come to include foundational figures of the poetry written in Spanish like Gaspar Pérez De Villagrà, and José Martí (Axelrod et al), as well as contemporary Puerto Rican, Chicano, and Nuyorican figures such as Julia de Burgos, Víctor Hernández Cruz, Gary Soto, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and Pedro Prietri. They appear alongside their contemporaries, US poetic icons such as Charles Olson, John Ashbery, Allen Ginsberg, and Sylvia Plath (Axelrod et al, Ochester, Hoover). But these gestures of inclusion have been clearly uneven, limited in number, and—taking into account the scope of the literary presence of the Spanish language in the US and its territories—indisputably biased against Spanish. Latino and Hispanic literatures are a far more complex and ambiguous phenomenon than what is commonly portrayed, and this complexity is inexorably interlaced with the even wider frame of the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual literary reality of a country where languages other than English have been systematically relegated to a secondary, private role by concerted policies of cultural domination.

The underrepresentation of US poets whose main literary language is Spanish, and the very nature in which this language is portrayed in the discussion of US literature, draw the southern border of the US canon along two lines: the adoption of English as the main form of expression, and the required presence of a set of themes clearly reconcilable with the political struggle of a subaltern minority. Any Latino/a poetry that does not conform to these features does not receive further examination. Furthermore, it seems that there is no interest in knowing if or how this poetry dialogues with the wider US literary traditions. US poets that write in a language other than English, as I will demonstrate through the examples of José Kozler, Cecilia Vicuña, and Lorenzo García Vega, are disregarded or underestimated within the context of US literature. A substantial number of poets affected by this marginalization are born abroad and maintain important

¹ Richard Blanco was chosen in 2013 as the fifth inaugural poet of the United States and performed in the first inauguration ceremony of the US president Barack Obama. Juan Felipe Herrera was named the 21st Poet Laureate of the US in 2015. Martín Espada was the 2018 recipient of the prestigious Poetry Foundation's Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, endowed with \$100,000.

international links that make the question of language, subject matter, and national origin part and parcel of the complex issues that I am addressing in this article.

In this article, Jacques Derrida's intimate examination of the effects of the sociolinguistic situation in French-controlled Algeria serve as a general reference frame when examining the situation of Latinx in the US. It is not my intention to draw a direct parallel between French Algeria and the situation of the Latinx population in the US, nor will I explicitly apply the complex theoretical notions developed in Derrida's essay. Instead, I will take some useful arguments present in his essay to help me rethink the significant role that poetry written in Spanish plays in the US. When Derrida writes on linguistic interdictions in colonial settings, he takes into account much more than the obvious results of the inhibition in the use of a particular language, such as the practical disappearance of that language from the public sphere. Derrida also notices the distortions that this interdiction generates in the relationship between writers with their adopted national language ("the language of the host"), with their mother tongues, and with the act of writing in itself. Writing under conditions where language use is coopted by colonial impositions (as I believe is the case in the US regarding Spanish) has consequences, regardless of the language in which Latino/a writers end up expressing themselves. I find particularly nourishing Derrida's characterization of the various sensibilities towards languages noticeable in a few key 20th-Century Jewish writers that he developed in an extensive note to the main text under the tentative title of "*The Monolingualism of the Host: Jews of the Twentieth Century, the Mother Tongue, and the Language of the Other, on Both Sides of the Mediterranean*" (78-93). Derrida's considerations on the use of Jewish and/or other languages adopted by Franz Rosenzweig, Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas, Franz Kafka and Paul Celan provide examples on how and why those kinds of choices are made. They also illustrate how similar reactions toward the use of a particular language could be motivated by diverse attitudes. Derrida's complex typology encourages me to seek a widening in the critical approaches to the situation of Latino poetry.

Ideas of "creolization" proposed by Edouard Glissant also provide an important critical reference. Glissant emphasizes the need to go beyond languages and linguistic borrowings, and into the consideration of poetics to understand how contemporary authors relate to literary traditions in a globalized world. Glissant's views could be extrapolated to the US context to serve as an illustration of the growing interdependence of the poetry written within the country, regardless of the language in which a literary work has been produced. Glissant's ideas also serve as a reminder of the limitations of the tools we use to understand the relationship of US literature with Latino/a Spanish writers. Following his lead, I would affirm that ongoing transnational contacts between poetics, even when they manifest themselves in Spanish, should be considered a significant transformative element of the US canon. I believe that both Derrida and Glissant offer novel ways of

thinking the interdependency of national and linguistic traditions in ways more attuned to internationalized cultural realities of our times. That said, I propose we adopt parameters that do not make language, subjects, and place of birth exclusionary criteria to determine if a poet fits the US literary community. This is particularly important in the case of Latinx poets writing in Spanish a literary categorization that itself has a hard time embracing its own multilingual, multinational, multifaceted composition.

Just limiting the scope of this critical endeavor to the discursive parameters of US Latino poetry, it is inevitable to notice some important parts missing from consideration in the debate. The role of English, and the English-based, hybrid or interlingual manifestations, normally referred to as *Spanglish* have been identified, celebrated, and promoted as the preferred form of communication by Latinx Studies specialists (Flores and Yúdice; Savin; Luis; Bruce-Novoa; Aparicio, “Nombres”; Aparicio, “On Sub-Versive”). As a matter of fact, on the one hand, the poetic works associated with the linguistic variations constitutive of *Spanglish* have found acceptance within US contemporary poetry and its institutions, critical considerations, and anthologies. On the other hand, the discussion of the role that Spanish language plays in that same literary community, and within the multicultural setting of the US as a whole, is still conspicuously absent from general discussion, or is reduced to a barely explored theoretical reference that finds Spanish unsuitable for communication within the larger community (Aparicio, “Nombres” 55). The role of Spanish tends to be approached in opposition to English as one of the two “contending cultural worlds” that force bicultural Latinx into interlingual creations (Flores 60). Perhaps the most telling part of this complex equation is that once this opposition has been established, Spanish disappears altogether from the debate and there is no further consideration of its contributions to literature written in the US. Within this logic, poetry written in Spanish in the US seems to be systematically banned, implicitly or explicitly, from public recognition, grant applications, and/or acknowledgment in state or federal awards.

Indeed, it is difficult to find a reference to a major poetry awards or fellowships granted within the US to a hispanophone Latinx poet for lifetime accomplishments or for a book originally written in Spanish. The closest case is Juan Felipe Herrera, the 21st Poet Laureate of the US, whose work includes some books originally written in Spanish. However, unsurprisingly, the granting organization—the Academy of American Poets—did not make any mention of his work written in Spanish (“United States”). Likewise, The Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award only considers “original poetry, written originally in English by a poet who is a citizen or legal resident alien of the United States” (“Tufts”). The Pulitzer Prize is open to any US citizen, but does not accept translations, defined as “any text initially written in a language other than Modern English” (“Book submission”). Most major awards or fellowships—among others the John Simon Guggenheim

Poet Laureate or Fellowship for a Poetry Work, the Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry, the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize—do not mention explicitly any language requirement, but they only offer information in English and do not include a single Spanish-language poet or work written in Spanish among their historic records of beneficiaries (“Fellows,” “Rebekah,” “The Bollingen,” “Ruth”). The National Poetry Series (NPS) states among its purposes, “To give American poets, of all ethnic and racial groups, gender, religion, and poetic style, access to publishing outlets not ordinarily available to them” (“Books”). Nonetheless, the NPS makes no references to any linguistic minority and, up to this moment, this poetry prize has not been awarded to any book written originally in Spanish by an American poet.²

Poetry written in Spanish is generally excluded from occupying any meaningful space in anthologies or any other collective gathering of US literature. The very few US anthologies that include samples of poetry written in Spanish do so in number and form that confirms an interdicted condition and a subaltern status within the US poetic landscape; that is, poems written in Spanish are absent because the unspoken rule is that bilingual authors are best represented by their English work, or because their poetry originally written in Spanish has been replaced by English translations. The modification of the linguistic code is undertaken without any kind of discussion or debate about what this variation actually means for the community of readers.³

² While reviewing this article, I received news of three recently created poetry awards for book-length works originally written in Spanish by US authors: the Premio de Poesía Feria Internacional del Libro Latino y Latinoamericano (FILLT) ‘Poetry Award International Latino and Latino American International Book Fair’ (“I Premio”), the International Poetry Prize Poet in New York (“II Poet”), and the The Ambroggio Prize. The first two poetry awards have only been awarded once. The Ambroggio Prize was established in 2017 and requires Spanish manuscripts to be accompanied with an English translation (“Ambroggio”). These initiatives, though promising, are still far from being comparable in their scope, economic endowments or literary prestige with any of the poetry award aimed to recognize US English poetry.

³ As stated in the first paragraphs of this article, general anthologies of US poetry that include poems originally written in Spanish are exceptional. A rare anthology that includes poetry originally written in Spanish is *The New Anthology of American Poetry* edited by Steven Gould Axelrod, Camille Roman, and Thomas Travisano. The three volumes that form this anthology—more than 2000 pages in total—encompass poetry from the Pre-Columbian period until the present. The anthology includes a few pieces in Spanish with English translations by Gaspar Pérez De Villagrà, José Martí, Evaristo Ribera Chevremont, Carmen Cecilia Beltrán, Julia de Burgos, and even a few corridos. I don’t know of any other case of general modern and postmodern contemporary anthologies of US poetry where poetry written in Spanish is included in such a careful and intentional way. It is worth noticing that, even in this case, important questions about the proportionality of the number of pages dedicated to the Spanish language remains. It is also significant that the third volume of the anthology—more than 500 pages dedicated to poetry from 1950 to the present—only reproduces two pages of poetry written in Spanish, a Julia de Burgos poem. The rest of the Latinx poets included

Even within the much more restricted sphere of anthologies dedicated exclusively to Latinx literature, the suppression of work written in Spanish persists by underestimating its significance, or by restricting its presence to collections published exclusively in English. In fact, we have started to see anthologies of contemporary poetry mostly focused on US writers whose preferred poetic expression is, precisely, in Spanish (Kanellos; López Adorno; Moret; del Pliego and Fisher; Dávila). Significantly, most of these anthologies are published abroad, in predominantly Spanish-speaking countries. This paradoxical situation only starts making sense, first, if we consider colonial relationships, past and present, of the US with the Spanish language; and, then, if we take into account the multifaceted processes of resistance to cultural assimilation undertaken by important demographic segments in the US traditionally associated with Spanish.

Historical data we might gather to support this line of argumentation is far from being immune to debate and interpretation. Nevertheless, the presence of Spanish in what is today US territory dates back to the arrival of explorers, *conquistadores*, missionaries, colonizers, and a wide array of populations brought or assembled around colonial settlements since the sixteenth century. These settlers maintained the use of Spanish among themselves and their mestizo descendants, and managed to maintain it and spread it among the (surviving) colonized native populations. Indeed, Spanish was—and still is—used in Puerto Rico, in the Southeast of the continental US—today’s Florida—(Fernández Armesto 3-34), and in the vast territories of North America that were conquered and controlled (though in many cases precariously) by Spain, and after the independence of the Latin American colonies, in what is today California and “the Midwest from the Mississippi to the Rockies” (Fernandez Armesto 35). During the nineteenth century, through a subsequent process of its own imperialist expansion, the US incorporated those territories. It later established other forms of military, political, and economic domination throughout the Caribbean, North, Central and South America; this later expansion triggered, in turn, different waves of migration from

in that volume (Alberto Ríos, Gary Soto, Victor Hernandez Cruz, Lorna Dee Cervantes) did not write in Spanish or are not represented by poems written in that language.

I have already mentioned the anthology edited by Ed Ochester, *American poetry now*, and *Postmodern American Poetry*, edited by Paul Hoover. Both of them incorporate poems written by Latinx authors, including some that make use of some Spanish in their particular interlingual code, but there are no poems actually written in Spanish or representation of poetry written by poets whose main means of poetic expression is Spanish.

These practices of invisibilization of the Spanish language are even more puzzling when found in anthologies fully dedicated to Latinx poets. In *Paper Dance 55 latino poets*, edited by Victor Hernández Cruz, Leroy V. Quintana and Virgil Suarez, there is not a single poem in Spanish, even though at least one of the poets (Lucha Corpi) is represented by translated poems originally written in that language. The case of *Looking Out, Looking In: Anthology of Latino Poetry*, edited by William Luis, though more complex, contains multiple examples of those same practices. I will address other examples in this article.

Latin American countries (González 58-60). The process of anglophone imperial expansion included the suppression of the Spanish language that was still predominantly used in large portions of those territories, such as New Mexico, the Río Grande Valley of Texas and, of course, Puerto Rico (González 228-30). However, the incorporation of what today constitutes the southern and southwestern US territories once controlled by Spain or Mexico, and the annexation of Puerto Rico in 1898, put Spanish in a conflictive position in the US debate on language and national identity, questioning the monolingualism imposed on the new nation. Therefore, we could claim that, as Juan González has assertively stated, “Spanish, Cajun, and surviving Native American languages are not ‘foreign.’ They are the tongues of long-settled linguistic minorities who were absorbed by an expanding multinational state” (González 230).

The growing presence of Latinx/Hispanic populations is being violently confronted by current xenophobic and ultra-nationalist views that consider migrants from Latin American countries, and their descent, to be a menace to Anglo-Saxon cultural hegemony. And at the forefront of the forceful push towards the complete assimilation of Hispanics, there is a battle over the use of language (Aparicio, “Of Spanish” 249-50). According to the United States Census Bureau, by July 2016 Hispanics constituted 17.8% of the nation’s population, a total of 57.5 million people; 34.2% of them were born abroad. 72.4%, a total of about forty million people age five and older, speak Spanish at home (United States, Census Bureau). That makes Spanish a *de facto* second language of the United States, and the US the second largest Spanish-speaking nation, behind Mexico (Lago 23). Unfortunately, this data does not seem to match, or match only in an antagonistic way, the institutional attitude toward Spanish. As González has pointed out, “unlike many nations in the world, the United States has yet to recognize the right of language minorities to protection against discrimination” (310). In fact, as Frances Aparicio points out, Spanish has been considered a “threat to English as both an imperial and national language” by US nativists and supporters of the English Only movements (“Of Spanish” 252). In addition, there has been a systematic, institutional effort to eradicate Spanish from public life, and to effectively maintain a colonial interdiction over the use of language, in fact a prohibition that oversees the “diglossia” characteristic of its present subaltern status (Moreno Fernández 3).

In such a hostile environment, the mere survival of an alternative literary tradition has to be considered as a monumental achievement, even if this cultural subsistence is undertaken in the limited and biased ways already described. Because of the codes that establish them as products of a heavily categorized literary genre, in which a particular image of the nation is drawn, anthologies also provide a significant index against which to measure the acceptance in the canon of poets associated with the Latinx upheaval. Aparicio has in fact applied this contrasting mechanism in order to underline the slow but palpable transformation of the

nation's literary canon to include Hispanic authors ("Writing Migrations" 796-7). For Aparicio, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* constitutes an example of "a project that conscientiously included significant minority voices" ("Writing Migrations" 797).

I find it difficult to object to the critical reading that Aparicio and others have done of poetry written both in *Spanglish* and/or in English. Poets such as Pedro Pietri, Gary Soto, Víctor Hernández Cruz, Lorna Dee Cervantes, among others, fit in the wider—in fact global—trend of postcolonial writers that turned around certain impositions to "talk back" or "voyage in," attempting, in Edward Said's words, "to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories" (216). These authors are also regarded as these communities' true spokespersons, able to effectively communicate the complexity of their socio-historical experiences. In turn, this same idea, that is, who could be considered to be (or not) a true representative of the community, has established a discriminating factor whereby certain Latinx poets are preferred over others. It also set all Latinx poets apart from the rest of the US (anglophone) poets, whose political militancy is never counted as *the* prerequisite that would determine their belonging to the nation.

In a critical study on Latinx poetry, William Luis defines political engagement as an act of "creating cultural, linguistic, political, gender and racial spaces" (25). Luis's definition provides a key element to approach Latinx poetic endeavors, even if his method may run the risk of obliterating important connections between Latinx identities and other ethnic, linguistic, or cultural traditions. In fact, we should also consider that, taken at its most literal sense, Luis's notion of political engagement denies the possibility of any meaningful manifestation in poetry that is not routed through identarian themes. Affiliation with certain political causes (economic, racial, gender, and social) within the national framework of the US, establishes a second set of differences (the first being language) between transnational Spanish-speaking authors and Latinx writers. According to Luis's argument:

I observed a distinct difference between the literature of authors writing from their Spanish-speaking country of origin, authors writing in Spanish from abroad in the United States and authors writing in English from the United States. From the perspective of the literature I read, there was a close thematic and linguistic association between authors writing in Spanish, whether they lived in their country of origin or in the United States . . . With time, Peruvians or Chileans and Spaniards, who become involved in political, economic, racial, gender and social issues in the culture of their adopted homeland, they can also become Latinos, just as Anglo Americans can, and anyone else, including Asians. (Luis 24)

Luis's puzzling differentiation echoes a more subdued one established by Nicolás Kanellos in the introduction to his groundbreaking anthology *En otra voz. Antología de la literatura hispana en de los Estados Unidos* ('In Another Voice. Anthology of Hispanic Literature in the United States'). Kanellos distinguishes between the voices (and the experiences) of "natives" and those of "immigrants," especially "exiles." In this authoritative work, the latest group— "exiles"—seems to somehow have a lesser relevance because, as Kanellos points out, "En general, la literatura del exilio se ha ocupado más de las condiciones políticas en la *patria* que del destino de la comunidad de hispanos en los Estados Unidos" (43) 'In general, exile literature has occupied itself more with the political conditions of the *motherland* than with the destiny of the Hispanic community in the US.'⁴

It is impossible to distinguish the diverse negotiations of identity needed while recognizing the ever-changing nature of individual and collective experiences of transnational communities. But beyond that, the problem is that there are important sectors of this complex minority group that are difficult to account for if we only consider the "native" population. The limits imposed over a group of writers coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds reinforce the dismissal of the literary production of—broadly speaking—a third of Latinxs, at least those born abroad, in favor of those that, at least since the eighties, have become English-language writers. According to Kanellos, English writers are representative of "la literatura hispana que ha surgido de la corriente principal y sus instituciones y ha recibido de ellas la mayor influencia" (21) 'the Hispanic literature that comes from the mainstream and its institutions and have obtained from them the biggest influence.' One of the paradoxes here is that it is precisely the recent influx of immigrant and exile population coming from Spanish-speaking countries that substantially increased the visibility of Latinx cultures in the US, therefore allowing for the present critical interrogation of a supposedly homogeneous national narrative of US culture (Juan González 227-28).

The use of English among Latinx writers can be explained because they have been instructed in this language through their higher education as academics and/or creative writers (Aparicio, "On Sub-Versive" 797; Kanellos 26). The poets that write in Spanish are systematically excluded from consideration within that cultural Latinx framework. This group of writers is part of a wider diasporic culture, a culture that finally settled in the US along the contemporary massive and heterogeneous waves of migrants, exiles and refugees who came in search of an equally wide range of opportunities and experiences. Among these displaced writers, whom in many cases have become highly specialized in different areas of Hispanic literary or cultural studies, we find many poets. A significant group of them willingly stick to their own particular use of Spanish in their creative writing.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated all translations are my own.

Because of this creative trend, in addition to the difficulty of building meaningful social networks around poetry written in Spanish, many Hispanic poets find fewer opportunities for publishing or performing in the US, while transnational links with the rest of the (predominantly) Spanish-speaking world are maintained and strengthened over time. Regardless of their migratory status, the multiplicity of social allegiances (characteristic of migrants and exiles) and areas of engagement, their elusive localization, and their linguistic oddity, are all factors that contribute to these poets' lessened visibility, and as a result, they have literally become undocumented in the critical rosters of US authors. Furthermore, this lack of visibility makes it difficult for researchers to gather the information that would allow us to even understand the practical extent of this cultural marginalization.

The cultural disregard of US Hispanic writers who use Spanish as the preferred language of communication is depriving US literature of the transformative potential offered by this subaltern community. It also imposes a sort of "forced family separation" in the sense that this language-based literary discrimination denies Latinxs the possibility of thinking their traditions from the perspective of a shared literary lineage, with common ancestry and potential networks of relatives across both the northern and southern parts of the continent. The presence of Spanish speaking poets in the US is a powerful reminder of that possibility. When the relationship between languages and literatures is as tight and widespread as it is between English and Spanish in the US, political borders cannot prevent a productive creative dialogue from actually taking place within those very same borders. Latinx literatures would be better served by critical ideas that refuse to draw borders between literary traditions, such as those explored by Glissant. For Glissant the literary contacts of our globalized world is not so much about languages and linguistic borrowing and exchanges—that he calls *créolismes* 'creolisms'—but about the advancement of hybrid poetics—termed *créolisation* 'creolization'—that sprout from an open attitude about literary traditions present in other languages (121). His thinking reminds us of the limitations of the tools we use to understand the relationship of US literature with Latinxs, especially with Latinx Spanish writers.

From the perspective opened by Glissant's notion of *créolisation*, it seems imperative that we continue finding ports of entry for a more specific and complex understanding of poetics. This understanding entails an empathetic thrust associated with the common use of cultural forms and traditions present in different languages. Here too, the language-based exclusion of an important group of poets within this affective codependence complicates the profound hybridization characteristic of Latinx poetry and, in fact, of poetry written in the US as a whole. Regardless of the adoption of creolisms in Latinx writing, the ongoing process of creolization could also be a significant transformative and, therefore, effective element of the US canon operating in works written in Spanish; this perspective

does not lend itself easily to binary simplifications. This complexity should be kept in mind when approaching poets such as José Kozer, Cecilia Vicuña, or Lorenzo García Vega, three examples of a much wider phenomenon.

José Kozer (Cuba, 1940), provides an emblematic case of the situation described above. He has lived almost continuously in the US since his arrival in 1960, maintaining an important literary presence, including having selections of his poetry translated into English. He has also obtained extraordinary achievements and recognitions, for example, the prestigious Pablo Neruda Iberoamerican Poetry Award. However, his work is conspicuously absent from all major US anthologies of poetry. When included in the few collections restricted to Latinx and Hispanic authors, his writing has been consistently misconstrued in ways that question his own belonging to the US and the Latinx community, displacing his original poems to some secondary, subservient place. For example, Kanellos's anthology *En otra voz* reproduces—in their original Spanish form—three of Kozer's early poems. Kenya Dworkin y Méndez's introduction to these texts places the author squarely as a Cuban exile, although, when the anthology was published, he had already been living in the US for forty years and had developed a complex network of relationships within the country. Dworkin y Méndez also describes his work as centered both in Cuban interests and domestic, private life, even though two of those three poems deal, from very particular perspectives, with the conditions of the Latinx community the poet refers to as “mi gente” (494) ‘my people.’ Equally problematic is the framework that Ilan Stavans provides for Kozer in *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*. The four poems included in this anthology appear only in an unattributed English translation, and the poet is also introduced as a political exile, a member of the Cuban diaspora, who has been disconnected from quotidian national realities, but not as a full, prominent citizen of the US with a specific background and his own perspectives on life and politics (1241).

I would argue that these characterizations of Kozer are the result of an ideological preconception that produces a reading of his poetry which does not take into account this author's trajectory as a writer, particularly his more “engaged” poetry of the early seventies. These perspectives seem to favor a narrowly defined reading that conditions the perception of what it means to be an (Hispanic) American poet by comparing his work with a pre-established set of thematic features, rather than with the particularities of Kozer's poetic quest. The subjects—social or domestic—and the locations—Cuban or American—alluded to in a poem should not be the only factors at stake in defining the relationship between a writer and a country, in this case, the US. Both Kanellos's and Stavans's anthologies cast Kozer's unique style as a glitch that seems to disqualify him from being a representative of the Latinx experience in the US, when it could be read as an irreplaceable contribution to the multicultural, multilingual, and transnational cultures generated by the rich specificity of US demographics. However, it will be

necessary to clarify that by no means do these considerations pretend to disqualify the work accomplished by Kanellos, Stavans, and their respective research teams. On the contrary, this example illustrates the extraordinary challenges that arise when attempting to incorporate multicultural, multilingual, and transnational authors into a critical frame that still relies on sanctioned national parameters.

A change of perspective allows a very different reading of the domestic and geographic setting of Kozler's poetry. An example is "Gramática de Papá" 'Dad's Grammar.'

Había que ver a este emigrante balbucir verbos de yiddish a
español,
había que verlo entre esquelas y planas y bolcheviques historias
naufragar frente a sus hijos,
su bochorno en la calle se parapetaba tras el dialecto de los
gallegos, la mercancía de los catalanes,
se desplomaba contundente entre los andrajos de sus dislocadas
conjugaciones,
decía *va* por *voy*, *ponga* por *pongo*, se zumbaba las preposiciones,
y pronunciaba *foi*, *joives* decía y la calle resbalaba,
suerte funesta déspota la burla se despilfarra por las esquinas, . . .
(*Bajo este* 47)

'One had to see this immigrant stammer verbs from Yiddish to
Spanish,
one had to see him drift, a castaway, in front of his children among
notes and pages and Bolshevik stories,
in the streets his embarrassment found safety behind the parapet of
Galicians' dialect and Catalans' merchandise,
he toppled over impressively in the rags of his dislocated
conjugations,
said *va* for *voy*, *ponga* for *pongo*, buzzed prepositions,
pronounced *fue* as *foi*, when he said *joives* instead *jueves* the street
became slippery,
fatal luck-despotic mockery-squandered itself in street corners, . . .
(“Dad’s Grammar” 26)

Within the realm of a domestic sphere, the poem does indeed refer to memories of the country left behind, Cuba. However, if we take into account Kozler's experiences in the US and the way linguistic struggle played out in the birth of his poetry (Sefamí 49-50), "Gramática de papa" becomes a projection against the memories of the past, including tensions and relationships between unequally

regarded languages, social identities, and poetics applicable in the US context to Kozer himself.

These linguistic and social tensions, along with a deeply hybridized poetics, resurfaces frequently in Kozer's poems with a wide variety of tones and nuances. For example: in "Holocausto" 'Holocaust,' historical trauma is portrayed through the eyes of Kozer's own family, which materializes in an abrupt melee of languages: Spanish, Yiddish and German (*El carillon* 37-8). "Encuentro en Cho-fu-sa" 'Encounter at Cho-fu-sa' an intimate address to the poets' wife, becomes an erudite collage of world literature references (*Acta* 26-30). "Wrong Cognate" makes out of a family anecdote a reveling joke about the conflicting relationships between languages in the US (*Mezcla* 243). So, if we take into consideration the depth of his contact with diverse forms of Spanish, the *mestizaje* of his unique "neo-baroque" style, or the impressive range of intertextual interaction (from within his Spanish writing) with English, Jewish, or Asian traditions, any attribution to purism and isolation is inconceivable; unless we try to measure Kozer's contributions exclusively according to the aesthetic and formal parameters used to represent a more narrowly defined Latinx community.

In terms of the heterodox understanding of the transformative possibility of poetic language, the most accessible example may be the one provided by Cecilia Vicuña, a poet, artist, and filmmaker born in Chile in 1950 who, after her initial exile in England and Colombia, arrived to the US in 1980. She has been living between the US and Chile since the end of the political repression imposed by Augusto Pinochet's regime—a military dictatorship toppled in 1990—allowed her to do so. Vicuña's work is difficult to approach without the support of categorizations that surpass traditional poetic practices. Her work is deeply rooted in popular, Native-American poetics. In fact, she incorporates different artistic domains (painting, installations, performance, video) into her writing, mixing and fusing their formal structure without the possibility of establishing a clear demarcation between them. Even when considering only poetry presented in the traditional book format (a limited perspective on her written work), it is clear that her poetry sprouts from a multilingual thrust that weaves terms taken from different linguistic codes. These codes include native languages of the Americas and English woven into a Spanish tapestry that privileges oral traditions.⁵ While the result of her artistic practice is utterly original, the oral and native elements present in the mix are comparable to those seen in some Chicana and Nuyorican poets (Bruce-Novoa 237; Aparicio, "Nombres" 48). Notice for example how, in her poem "Fábulas del comienzo y restos del origen" ('Fables of the beginning and remains of the origin'), Vicuña weaves "mis tres lenguas" 'my three languages'—Spanish,

⁵ Examples of this poetic attitude can be found in poems such as "Palabra e hilo" "Word and Thread", in the series "Mesa de poeta" ('Poet Desk'), and "Fábulas del comienzo y resto del origen" ('Fables of the Beginning and Rest of the Origin') (V s.p.).

Quechua, and English—to create a text that is not only a hybrid recreation of the origins of language, but also a metaphoric textile, a vindication of change and transformation, and a singular poetic form.

Una lengua ve en la otra el interior del estar.
El poema se desvanece en los vórtices entre las dos.

Awayo
Mi
awayl
voy a tejer
mis tres
Lenguas away.

El arte no está en el objeto, ni en el ojo del que lo ve, si no en el encuentro de los dos. (V s.p.)

‘A language sees in another the interior of its self.
The poems vanish in the vortices between both.

Awayo
My
awayl
I’m going to weave
my three
Languages away.

Art is not in the object, nor in the eye that sees it, but in the encounter of both.’

The open dialogue among languages is also evident in the English translation of her work. The collaborative nature of many of her projects also extends to these translations. She undertakes an important role in the creative conversation with the translators, who are encouraged to go beyond recreating the “original” pieces in English (*Saborami* 9, *Unravelling* 11).

Vicuña does not shy away from political involvement with issues that touch both Chilean and US national matters. She also transcends those realms by addressing transnational and global concerns such as feminism and ecology. Her interaction with all sorts of poetry written in the US is profound, both through her

translators—including Rosa Alcalá, another remarkable Latina poet of English expression—and also through figures such as Jerome Rothenberg, or Charles Bernstein. Such is the strength of her dialogue with the US that in 2008 she felt that her work had a larger overall recognition in the US than in her native Chile (“En Chile”). Still, the presence of her writing in the US is uneven, unofficial, and her Spanish poetry is frequently barred from appearing in anthologies.

Finally, I would like to close this brief review of cases by pointing towards one of the most interesting cases of Spanish-speaking writers in the US, that of Lorenzo García Vega. García Vega is an odd poet whose style also exceeds any attempt at definition and classification by genre. He was born in Cuba in 1926 and arrived in the US in 1973, where he lived until his death in 2012. The 1959 political revolution in his country of origin made him an exile, first inside Cuba, and after a brief period in Spain and Venezuela, in New York and Miami. His work, published and reprinted in several Spanish-speaking countries, including the US, is incomprehensible without taking into account the matter of exile. As Jorge Luis Arcos has stated, in his case exile “es un tema transversal, que recorre toda su obra, y su vida también” (36) ‘is a transversal theme, that crosses his whole work, and also his life.’ In the work he wrote in the US, one could localize the exiled center of enunciation within the US, precisely because, as José Kozler does, Lorenzo García Vega moves away from common political declarations and predictable references to the US. Nonetheless, raw criticism of his adopted country is, though oblique, abundant. It is true, he does not position his own as the general cause of Latinxs, but neither can his writings be disconnected from that cause. His work supplies the sort of unique approach that widens and enriches the comprehension of a collective cultural issue in ways reminiscent of the “sober”, “intensive” use of language characteristic of a minor literature as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (19). One could say, by way of Deleuze and Guattari’s take on Kafka’s use of the German language of Prague, that García Vega chooses to express himself in his own particular Cuban Spanish “such as it is, in its very poverty,” thereby choosing “to arrive at a perfect and unformed expression —an intense, material expression” (19).

García Vega’s glances at the social, cultural, and working conditions in the US are especially poignant (*Rostros* 133-138; *Años* 51-54), precisely because he embraces a way of writing that is inseparable from his very personal use of Spanish. His first writings in the US—dated from 1972 to 1975—appeared in a diary, initiated before his arrival to this country, titled *Rostros del reverso* (‘Other Side Faces’). These texts already engaged with the societal experiences and local realities of New York and Miami—a city that he ingeniously renamed *Playa Albina* ‘Albina Beach.’ The strikingly limited number of English words he uses in this and other texts does not make his writing any less hybrid and tense.

The constant recreation of his Cuban past, even his encompassing meditation around the nature of Cuban identity and culture, is informed by a no less tenacious attention to the reality of *Playa Albina*, especially his own domestic space, and the Publix supermarket where he works as a “bag boy.” The beginning of *El Oficio de perder* (‘The Losing Profession’), one of the better known volumes of his singular memoirs, is paradigmatic of how the American reality melts in his writings into the Cuban, and of how the apparent detachment from certain social fights is, in fact, an irreplaceable way of understanding his situation and the social dynamics of writing in his adopted country. This first chapter—as most of the book—locates the events recalled by his memory in his native Cuba, but the act of writing is itself distilled, as we see in the following paragraph, from the author’s life in the US.

A veces estoy tan solo, en una Playa Albina donde vivo, que casi es como si, en algunas ocasiones, perdiera el sentido de la realidad. Me acuesto, inevitablemente tengo que acostarme, después de regresar del supermercado donde trabajo. En una Playa Albina hay sol con 90 grados, o un sol con 92 grados, o hasta un sol con mil grados, ¡lo mismo da!; lo cierto, lo único cierto es que uno regresa del trabajo de bag boy, se quita el delantal de bag boy, y durante un tiempo, bajo palio de aire acondicionado, tiene que ir tratando de que el cuerpo vaya licuando, o perdiendo, todo ese sol que en un parqueo, y conduciendo un carrito, uno ha estado acumulando dentro de sí. (15)

Sometimes I'm so lonely, in a Playa Albina where I live, that it is almost as if, sometimes, I have lost the sense of reality. I lie down; inevitably I have to lie down, after coming back from the supermarket where I work. In a Playa Albina there is a 90-degree sun, or a 92-degree sun, or even a thousand-degree sun, it's all the same! The truth is that you come back from your job as *bag boy*, you take off your *bag boy* apron, and for a while, under the canopy of the air conditioning, you have to try to make your body start liquefying, or losing, all that sun that in a parking lot, and pushing a shopping cart, you have been accumulating inside.

Only one English expression appears in this initial paragraph—“bag boy”—but its resonances offer a sobering view of social and linguistic relations in the US, as if his place in English-speaking society was fully perched on that precarious labor tag. As with other US Spanish-speaking writers, one cannot claim that Lorenzo García Vega lacks interest in communicating with the rest of US culture. From his first writings in the US we have evidence of his interest in knowing what is going on in the New York art galleries, exhibits, popular musicals, films, (*Rostrós* 139-

150). He surprisingly engages with elements as emblematic of American popular culture as Disney World (*Oficio* 101-4). His critical attention to the works of contemporary poets continues well into his old age (*Cristal* 161). He established meaningful relationships with, for example, the work of poets such as Armand Schwerner (*Bicoca* 287-88), or US artists such as Joseph Cornell, whose box assemblages become a key model for his mature poetics.

Lorenzo García Vega also brings us closer to an understanding of certain realities inscribed in the body of his work and, in fact in his own body, by a policy of exclusion and cultural isolation in which language plays an important factor. García Vega's definition of writing as a "losing profession" (*Oficio* 39-47; *Cristal* 115-6), the realization of his ghostly presence in society, his inward turn toward an "autistic" writing (*Oficio* 16-7), his frequent references to his medicalized mental conditions (*Rostros*, 135; *Oficio* 116; *Cristal* 146), his struggles with alcohol (*Oficio* 118), the competing reality of dreams and *day-dreams*—another rare English term repeated in his pages. None of these issues are insignificant. All of them dialogue with a poetic and social reality inscribed in a complex and meaningful relationship with the location of his writing.

Even with authors who are not usually associated with US Latinx poetry, who do not use the expected English or interlingual code, or who chose to make their writing about issues other than identity politics, we can find manifestations of key themes related to US Latinx culture. These authors' refusal to accept the language pushed upon them—whether we see this refusal as an effective act of resistance to cultural homogenization or not—favors transnational liaisons between US locations and a world-wide Spanish-speaking community, including the Latin American diaspora. It also moves to the forefront of the debate the need to contemplate issues of poetics, rhetoric and style, issues that had in practice been deemed unimportant in the case of "authorized" Latinx writers.

So far there has not been much interest in researching the range of relationships that US Spanish-speaking poets have established within the interdicting English society. There is little or no interest in answering the question of what it means to write poetry in Spanish in the US. In a country with such an extraordinary presence of Spanish speakers, this lack of interest is in itself extraordinarily meaningful. It does have important effects. Maybe the most significant aspect of these effects is that, almost inevitably, these poets have become invisible and remain "undocumented" within the very same national culture they should purport to represent. More than likely, poetry written in Spanish in the US would also be sent back—in fact, literally "deported"—for publication in a predominantly Spanish-speaking country since, as ratified by Mercedes Cortázar, US publishing companies "están interesadas en publicar sólo obras en inglés y usualmente traducen libros escritos en otra lengua cuando han tenido éxito en sus respectivos países" (600) 'are interested in publishing only English works and

usually translate books written in other languages when they are successful in their respective countries.’ Besides that, the relationships of contemporary Spanish-speaking poets with English are unexplored, though it is not difficult to notice the deep effects of this diglossic interdiction. Here a more detailed approach to the subject—such as the exemplary *Monolingualism of the Other* by Jacques Derrida—could facilitate the necessary opening of the field that could help us better understand this question.

It may be too soon to offer a detailed list of the secondary reasons for which poets like those discussed here are excluded from a meaningful debate within the framework of US literature. Economic, educational, and demographic factors should also be taken into consideration, but none of these areas would make the exclusion comprehensible without having in mind the nationalistic perspective that portrays Spanish as a foreign language in the US and the poetry by nationals born abroad as less representative of the national experience.

Likewise, these pages are nothing but the beginning of a debate on the appropriate ways to correct the bias against these underrepresented writers. A good way to do so is to simply consider their work, also in their original language, alongside other US writers, regardless or beyond their obvious subject matter. This consideration would send the unequivocal message that US literature is not monolingual, and that all poets, no matter how they end up writing from the United States, are part of its complex literary life.

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