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# Imagining Spanish and Latin American Poets in their Neoliberal and Post-Dictatorial Contexts

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### Review/Reseña

John Burns. *Contemporary Hispanic Poets: Cultural Production in the Global Digital Age*.  
Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2015.

## Imagining Spanish and Latin American Poets in their Neoliberal and Post-Dictatorial Contexts

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John Burns' study of Hispanic poetry from Chile, Mexico, and Spain employs a cultural studies approach in its analysis of recent poetic production in Spanish. It is innovative in its transatlantic scope, and is a valuable contribution to attempts to reconsider the role and status of the poet in globalized—and especially neoliberal—socioeconomic contexts. The introduction frames the book's larger arguments regarding the notion of “imagining the poet” in recent Spanish and Latin American poetry (approximately 1960-today). It draws on work by critics such as Arjun Appadurai, Néstor García Canclini, Jill Kuhnheim, and William Rowe, in order to analyze the impact of neoliberal economic and social models on the production and consumption of literary works. Burns is keen to historicize the *topos* of “imagining the poet” from Romanticism until the current moment, and his introduction poses a

number of insightful questions regarding the status of the poet and poetry. To provide one example, he inquires: “if in a given context, the public image of the poet has been traditionally read as that of a national visionary, how has the vision of nation changed in light of globalization, and how have the production and reception of the visionary changed with it?” (3) At the same time, while issues like the relevance of national traditions to individual poets’ work, “glocalization,” and neoliberal economies of production and consumption are well-addressed, there is little engagement with flows of information from the perspective of digital media studies, apart from a brief allusion to the work of Manuel Castells (and later, to Donna Haraway and Loss Pequeño Glazier). While Burns does consider the online presence of several poets in later chapters, there is insufficient engagement with relevant new media concepts such as electronic literature and the cyborg, for example, which are only briefly mentioned throughout the book.

The first chapter, titled “The Mad Precursors,” presents a surprising, yet effective pairing of poets: Spaniard Leopoldo María Panero and Chilean Raúl Zurita. Burns focuses on the pathology of madness that characterizes biographical accounts of these artists’ work as well as their poetic production. Following his contextualization of the neoliberal economic policies instituted in Chile following the bloody September 11, 1973 coup d’état, Burns draws on José Joaquín Brunner’s description of the privatization of the culture industry in Chile, which proposed that the marketing of the work of art should necessarily be identical to that of a refrigerator or a blender (28). Whereas the Chilean situation is primarily portrayed with respect to a discussion of state-sponsored terrorism and censorship, the book’s account of the Spanish market and culture industry revolves around the transition to democracy following Franco’s death and the rise of the PSOE in the early 80s. The chapter’s analysis of Panero’s “mad” poetry begins with a lengthy reading of the documentary *El desencanto* (1976), which tells the story of the Panero family’s ups and downs in Spanish society. Burns uses this discussion to situate Leopoldo María Panero’s portrayal in the Spanish press, which contrasts with the literary madness that characterizes key moments in his poetic corpus. This chapter provides substantial background information on the production of an image/imagining of the poet—and at times readers might feel impatient to get to the poems themselves—but the individual readings of Panero’s poetry are worth waiting for. While the reading of Panero concludes that “the shift from incoherence and ambivalence seems to mimic Panero’s own movement from a poet whose work was virtually out of print in the

early 1980s to a cult figure whom bloggers for *El mundo* find gloriously disruptive on the nightly news in the new millennium” (60), the sharpness of Burns’ readings of well-known poetry by Panero—more so than elucidations of Panero’s cameos in novels by authors like Roberto Bolaño, Enrique Vila-Matos, etc.—is the strongest element of this section. Burns’ individual readings of poetry by Chilean Raúl Zurita, which are primarily drawn from his first book, *Purgatorio* (1979), do a good job of accounting for the (often perplexing) complexity of the reception of Zurita’s early work in conservative and progressive circles alike in late 1970s Chile. The analysis of Zurita’s work is two-pronged, insofar as it closely reads select poems and installations by the artist while at the same time situating him in national and international artistic scenes. Burns ultimately cultivates both poets’ ambivalence towards the culture markets of these emerging neoliberal-globalized societies, couching their critiques in discourses of madness and pathology as cause and symptom that is, in the end, subject to market forces and to each individual poet’s own literary (self-) marketing campaign.

Chapter two addresses the relevance of the local (as reading public) in poetry by Mexican poet Silvia Tomasa Rivera. Burns highlights the centripetal force of the local in the composition and reception of her work (in Veracruz and in the more local context of Xalapa), beginning the chapter by juxtaposing her more or less minimalistic poetry with the effusive, neobaroque textualities of someone like Coral Bracho. Whereas Rivera’s “imagining of the poet” definitely appeals to the issue of gender in its lyric voice, her work does not follow a more traditionally-conceived “gynopoetics,” a term used by Jill Kuhnheim (and applied by Burns in this chapter) to situate Bracho’s take on gender in her poetry. Instead, Rivera’s work denies a number of conventions regarding the “acceptable” behavior for a female, Mexican poet at the time, in terms of her gendered poetic voice and public (national) stance as an intellectual. Similarly, chapter three addresses the figure of a female poet whose work demonstrates a series of problematic national and institutional affiliations: Chilean poet and visual artist Cecilia Vicuña. From the debated national affiliation (and mere existence) of the *Tribu No* to the bilingual problematics of Vicuña’s book *Saborami*, Burns highlights the blurring of borders in Vicuña’s work, with respect to nation, language, media, genre, and edition. He carries out a pointed critique of the reduction of the particularities of specific indigenous traditions in Vicuña’s work, in favor of a “general significance” (117) to be consumed by Western audiences. Similarly, his criticisms of Vicuña’s lack of irony and her anti-intellectualism (at the cost of being

assimilated into larger artistic circles) are well-taken. Towards the end of the chapter he turns to Vicuña's "digital hypertext" as it exists on the website (as repository) [ceciliavicuna.org](http://ceciliavicuna.org). In this context, Burns cites a major figure of digital poetry studies, Loss Pequeño Glazier, but does not pursue a potential reading that would truly engage "the digital" in poetic practice as revolutionizing artistic and lived praxis.

The book's final chapter focuses on poetry by two writers whose work is poised at the crossroads of the "mediascape" and the Mexican diaspora: Guillermo Gómez-Peña and U. S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera. Burns uses the concept of mediascapes, developed by Arjun Appadurai, in order to evaluate technology's incorporation into each poet's writing. In the case of the provocative performer and installation artist Gómez-Peña, this chapter carries out a sustained exploration of several texts from *The New World Border*, including a nuanced reading of video game and sci-fi vocabulary in "The Last Migration." Whereas in this chapter Burns does underscore the importance of certain virtual technologies in the polemical border artist's work, the analysis of Gómez-Peña's ethno-techno aesthetic might have included more profound discussion of the discursive import of particular technological elements in his performances, such as the ubiquitous figure of the cyborg, for example. Nevertheless, Burns shows himself to be a deft close reader of poetry in his exploration of blurring techniques in Herrera's "187 Reasons Mexicanos Can't Cross the Border," and the juxtaposition of Gómez-Peña and Herrera—with respect to the issue of "the poet as a navigator of a globalizing mediascape" (155)—makes for a strong final content chapter. Regarding these two important contemporary figures in the Mexican-American artistic community, Burns argues that they consider media to be a legitimate form for the dissemination of their work as well as a key discursive element through which to theorize about hybridity.

*Contemporary Hispanic Poets: Cultural Production in the Global, Digital Age* concludes by way of an epilogue that treats the figure of Spanish poet Luis García Montero. Burns locates García Montero as a major player in the culture industry in a way somewhat reminiscent of Zurita or Panero; García Montero maintains a website and uses social media, but keeps his lyrical (authorial) persona separate from his online presence, thus maintaining his poetry separate from commercial endeavors—despite his status as a well-known public (leftist) intellectual. The brief discussion of García Montero as a navigator of global media flows, for Burns, shows the relevance of poetry as "a significant cultural artifact" (171) in the dynamic, globalized media landscape, even as it jockeyes for attention amongst myriad forms of cultural

expression. And while the poets studied in this book demonstrate varied lived and literary responses to globalization, the Internet, and other technological innovations, the contribution of this book lies precisely in the fine readings of each Latin American or Spanish artist's individual, nuanced responses to these larger socio-economic realities.