Hispania Guest Editorial: The Disappointing Trend in Academic Publishing

John Ochoa

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Editor’s Message

In lieu of my editor’s message this issue, I invited our colleague John Ochoa (see his bio below) to write about the serious matter regarding the dwindling number of presses that are willing to publish literary monographs in the field of Hispanic Studies.

Sheri Spaine Long
Editor
Hispania

John Ochoa

John Ochoa is Associate Professor in the Departments of Spanish and Comparative Literature at Penn State University and director of Latino Studies. He teaches and researches Mexican intellectual and cultural history, and Inter-American literature.
Many of us teaching in Spanish departments at the undergraduate and graduate level were trained in literary studies. Our research, and thus our professional advancement tied to it, relies on the possibility of publishing our work. I recently learned (the hard way) that the University of Texas Press—one of the primary venues for publication in Latin American, Mexican, and United States, and Latino literary studies—will stop publishing new work in the field. It is likely to continue publishing in other fields related to Latin America and Mexico, but not in literature.

This is a marked and in many ways devastating departure. However, it is not that surprising: many US-based university presses have always operated “on the edge,” even at a loss. In the last couple of decades, several big-name presses initiated high-visibility monograph series in Spanish or Latin American literary studies, curated by a luminary in the field. These have usually lasted a few years and then disappeared. It is no secret that this comparatively small field is not a moneymaker. Some presses, like UT Press, had quite commendably continued to publish consistently in the field, despite market pressures, and seemed committed to providing a stable venue. Now it seems that reality has come home to roost.

This is one of the open secrets of our profession: a significant part of our professional advancement depends as much on the judgment of our peers who sit on editorial boards and who approve publications based on their merits and quality. But an equal, if not greater, part depends on the financial bottom-line of publishing venues. Academic presses are a business as much as an intellectual enterprise. Printing on paper and selling physical books is expensive and has become more so in contrast with the alternative of online publishing, which is quickly changing the landscape. Another time-tested avenue for Hispanists is publishing in Latin American or Spain, but oftentimes university administrators and university promotion and tenure committees find it difficult to evaluate the relative quality of these venues, and are most likely unable to read Spanish themselves. The only safe and sure bet for a young scholar at a university whose tenure standard requires a publication record, is a US- or European-based, non-commercial, university press or journal.

Needless to say, many institutions that employ and evaluate us have not caught up to the move towards electronic publishing, both in terms of book monographs and scholarly journals. Many administrations consider anything other than paper a lesser mode of dissemination, regardless of the credentials or standing of the editorial board.

I bring this issue to the readership of Hispania with two goals in mind: 1) to bring broad awareness to the magnitude of the problem, which is quite significant and seems to be growing; and 2) to open a very necessary discussion in order to find possible alternatives, solutions or ideas.