



## Transatlantic correspondence: modernity, epistolarity, and literature in Spain and Spanish America

by José Luis Venegas, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2014, 241 pp., \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 13 978-0814212561

Enric Bou

To cite this article: Enric Bou (2019) Transatlantic correspondence: modernity, epistolarity, and literature in Spain and Spanish America, *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 20:4, 577-579, DOI: [10.1080/14636204.2019.1692930](https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2019.1692930)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2019.1692930>



Published online: 26 Nov 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

**Transatlantic correspondence: modernity, epistolarity, and literature in Spain and Spanish America**, by José Luis Venegas, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2014, 241 pp., \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 13 978-0814212561

Organizing your own library is a daunting experience that can be done in a variety of ways. You could arrange it by country, in chronological order, by the author's date of birth or by language. Usually I choose the last method, ending up with Federico García Lorca alongside Gabriel García Márquez and Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis next to Fernando Pessoa. José Luis Venegas's enthralling *Transatlantic Correspondence* comes up with strong reasons for the last organizational choice. Inspired by authors such as Paul Gilroy (*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*) and Paul Giles (*Virtual Americas: Transnational Fictions and the Transatlantic Imagery*), Venegas deploys a defamiliarizing perspective that situates canonical Spanish and Latin American authors in dialogue with Latin American and Spanish culture respectively, overcoming the notion of literary canons as expressions of timeless national values and casting them instead as the result of transatlantic cultural interactions. Gilroy provides the basis for one of the main theses in this book: that epistolary writings and postal exchanges situate literary texts beyond their immediate cultural and geographical locations while opening them up to the duplicities that constitute modernity. The author develops a notion of epistolarity (the letter as metaphor, theme, rhetorical device) that becomes a very resourceful way to explore the double consciousness created by Spain and Spanish America's uneven engagement with dominant narratives of modernity. His purpose is – apparently – very unpretentious: “to offer a new reading of modernity from the Hispanic periphery by analysing essays, journalistic chronicles, and novels that intercalate letters or, while never quoting them directly, use them as central metaphors and motifs” (3). He uses the letter as a potent metaphor, as a mapping device, that “chart[s] transatlantic confluences, intersections, and discrepancies” thereby offering an alternative to rigid paradigms that interpret cultural exchanges between the metropolis and its former colonies through the lens of power dynamics (5).

Venegas's study offers an original approach to two key questions: the epistolary relationships between inhabitants/writers on two continents who mostly use the same language, and the epistolary genre itself, which is debated in different ways throughout the book. He defines “epistolarity” in different terms: as genre, trope, “device” and theme. The many examples analyzed provide a coherent corpus of letter writing as a way of engaging with modernity from a marginalized location, as the authors distanced themselves from Europe and North America's versions of modernity and reassessed the meaning of Spain's imperial and colonial past in the present. On several occasions throughout the book, Venegas aptly refers to Janet Altman's very useful notion of “epistolarity” (together with other authors such as Jacques Derrida, Ángel Rama and Bernhard Siegert). Indeed, the present time in the letter alternates between the time of the sender and that of the reader. Epistolary discourse is, in Altman's words, “the language of the pivotal yet impossible present. The *now* of narration is its central reference point, to which the *then* of anticipation and retrospection are relative. Yet *now* is unseizable, and its unseizability haunts epistolary language” (1982, 128–129; emphasis in original).

The introduction provides a well-developed historiographical presentation of relevant criticism, with an obvious preference for certain critics such as Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Walter Mignolo, Paul de Man and Fredric Jameson. Venegas manages to justify the choice of a

chronological framework and a selection of authors that includes Benito Jerónimo Feijoo, José de Cadalso and Juan Valera in Spain, and epistolary interventions by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Rubén Darío. He also discusses Eurocentric cultural notions concerning Hispanism as discussed in the works of Miguel de Unamuno and Pedro Salinas.

Venegas uses chapter 1, “Epistolarity and the Rhetoric of Hispanism”, to examine texts by Unamuno, Rama and Alberto María Carreño. Reading Unamuno’s many exchanges with Hispanic writers, Venegas shows how the letter emerges as a rhetorical strategy to contain difference rather than as an attempt to communicate in which self and other can engage in true communication. Following Homi Bhabha, he concludes that letters do not provide an unmediated expression of pure Spanish essence through interaction but rather that they are “a trace of a repressed colonial past” (68). The letter unsettles the authority of colonial culture. In chapter 2, “Quixotic Correspondence”, he discusses the principal ideological currents in Salinas’s *El defensor*. Salinas’s defense of letter writing is perceived as a way to protect spiritual values linked with the Hispanic way of life as opposed to North American rationalism and individualism. Venegas acutely links this rationale to readings of *Don Quixote* and the uses of epistolarity as a way to present Spanish America as a unified cultural front and to defend Spanish values that were threatened by North American materialism.

Chapter 3, “Postal Insurgency”, offers a succinct outline of the history of Mexico’s postal system after the 1911 Revolution. Reading Gustavo Sainz’s novels, Venegas shows how fragmentation in letter writing becomes a formal feature that links the dislocation of time with alternative historical interpretations. In chapter 4, “Transatlantic Transitions”, the author claims that letters signal aspects eliminated by censorship during periods of military repression and later avoided during political transitions to democracy. The use of letters in fictional works by Carmen Martín Gaité (*El cuarto de atrás*, 1978), Ricardo Piglia (*Respiración artificial*, 1980), Diamela Eltit (*Los vigilantes*, 1994) and Mauricio Rosencof (*Las cartas que no llegaron*, 2000) proves that it is possible to explore the transatlantic dimension of this “counter-hegemonic art of transition” (180). Chapter 5, “Failed Deliveries”, focuses on García Márquez and his disagreement with Spain’s official policies towards Latin America at the time of Sevilla’s 1992 Expo. This is taken as a starting point to reveal how in two of his novels, *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* and *El general en su laberinto*, letters are used as a form of expression that questions and challenges transatlantic cultural ties. Furthermore, epistolary correspondence becomes a form of intellectual independence from the metropolis, as “inherited forms can become the grounds of particularity and imitation need not mean cultural dependence” (214). Venegas’s chronological choice (taking 1898 as a starting point) is fully justified in the final chapter, “Crossing Letters”. The authors analyzed engage with modernity from locations distant from the center, using epistolarity to distance themselves from First World formulations of the modern. They also critically discuss Spain’s imperial and colonial past in the present.

This volume tackles many crucial issues: epistolarity, definitions of Hispanism and the relationship between a colonial power of sorts and its postcolonial subjects, offering a wide-ranging proposal to relocate Spanish and Spanish American literature beyond national and imperial paradigms, thus incorporating broader and more widespread structures that have been used recently to analyze the modern Atlantic world. By way of conclusion, one could assert that Venegas has done a superb task of realigning entrenched ways of reading Spanish and Spanish American exchanges. His study could also benefit from an approach based on polysystem theory or even from venturing into the growing field of Iberian studies. Authors such as Thomas Harrington (*Public Intellectuals and Nation Building in the Iberian Peninsula, 1900–1925: The Alchemy of Identity*, 2014) provide an example of the latter. Venegas’s book not only suggests good reasons to organize our libraries in a particular way

but also offers a stimulating and innovative transatlantic mode of reading literature written in Spanish.

## Reference

Altman, Janet. 1982. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Eric Bou  
*Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Venice, Italy*  
 enric.bou@unive.it

© 2019 Eric Bou  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2019.1692930>

