

El Contestador Australiano and the Transnational Flows of Australian Writing in Spanish¹

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In her introductory discussion of melancholia and nation formation, Vilashini Cooppan reflects on the ‘double movement’ of melancholia in which the nation may be understood as ‘both present and absent, territorially bounded and deterritorialized, confining and connecting, *often in the same moment*’ (34, italics in original). She explains:

For the subject who attempts national identification, the nation serves as a melancholic lost object—an object that lies outside the subject and, for that reason, must be incorporated, be made inner territory. But the subject who looks to incorporate the national object lost to him or her, whether by virtue of geographical distance (for the exile and the migrant) or civic exclusion (for the raced, gendered and queered subject), will find a seemingly nonnational quantity at the very point of national identification, the loss of the national precisely in the moment of its claiming, and a national object ever haunted by a global elsewhere. (34)

For the migrant subject, particularly, this simultaneity of presence and absence is manifest in the experience of negotiating new parameters of identity within a host nation while bearing the markers, narratives and language(s) of another. It is not surprising that accompanying the migrant’s efforts to participate in processes of national identification is an awareness of loss, resulting from distance and dislocation, and expressed frequently through nostalgia.

‘It is often nostalgia that links the national and the transnational,’ writes J.A. Brown-Rose in her study of Caribbean literature written in the United States (5). Brown-Rose makes the point that Caribbean writers located in the United States use nostalgia in their work as a critical device that allows characters and readers alike to evaluate the claims of nation and consider the complexities of transnational connections that shape migrant subjects. A similar argument could be made for the role of nostalgia in the literary production of Spanish-speaking migrants in Australia. This is not to assert that all migrant writing is nostalgic; although it has long been recognised as a significant aspect of migrant fiction in the Australian context, the tendency to reduce migrant writing to engagements in nostalgia has also been strenuously critiqued (Gunew). In the negotiation, however, between national and transnational perspectives and identities, a migrant writer’s memories of a home left behind may be a catalyst for evaluation and critique of both the place-of-origin and the newly acquired home of the host country (Brown-Rose 5).

In the short story ‘Lo que no fuimos’ (‘That which we were not’), by Ruben Fernández, an unnamed narrator returns to the city of his youth, where he meets a woman to whom, in the days and nights preceding his departure years before, he had failed, through cowardice, to declare his affection and attraction. In the intervening years of his life as a migrant he had suffered bouts of nostalgia, brought on, as he says, by a scent, a gesture, a pair of immense eyes (‘Por años deambulé por los laberintos de la memoria recordando los sueños que tuve de ella. Confabulada con un olor, aliada a un gesto, a unos ojos inmensos, la nostalgia atacó muchas veces’ [*El contestador* 16]). The story is both an evocation of the power of nostalgia and, at the same time, a rejection of its snares and entrapments. The first sentence makes this

When, in 1993, Fernández had enough material to publish a book of short stories, he was fortunate to receive funding from the Australia Council for the Arts and the collection *Querido Juan dos puntos* was published by Cervantes Publishing, a Sydney-based company established by another Uruguayan immigrant, Michael Gamarra, who saw that the Spanish speaking community needed a local publisher to bring to print the literary work being produced here. Gamarra was also the editor of one of the magazines mentioned above, *Versión*, and was a writer of short stories and *crónicas* and was, like Fernández, very much a producer of creative writing within this growing literary culture. In his book *Tres décadas de la emigración uruguaya en Australia (volumen II)* (2008) (*Three decades of Uruguayan emigration to Australia (volume II)*), Gamarra explains that the support received from the Australia Council to publish Fernández's stories was an acknowledgement of the quality of his work, as had already been recognised by the prizes gained through the literary competitions cited above (111–13). This recognition from the Australia Council was no small feat, as the support it has offered over the years to writing in languages other than English has been limited.

When *Querido Juan dos puntos* was published, it was given substantial coverage in the Spanish-language press in Sydney, receiving newspaper and magazine reviews and with Fernández featured on the cover of one of these magazines, *30 Días*. *Querido Juan dos puntos* was not the first book-length publication in Spanish in Australia—there had been more than twenty other books published here by then—but a number of factors combined to bring this collection more attention than previous Spanish-language works had received. First was Fernández's public profile as a journalist with SBS, making him well-known to most of Sydney's Spanish speakers, as well as to the editors of the Spanish-language press. Second, the early 1990s was the peak period for Spanish-language writing in Sydney, with a sizeable Spanish-reading population, a vibrant and growing infrastructure, and for a brief period access to government support for migrant and community language projects. The Australia Council funding which *Querido Juan dos puntos* received illustrates the apparent mainstream interest at this time in Australia's cultural and linguistic diversity.

Perhaps due in some measure to the coverage his book received, Fernández was awarded in 1996 an Australia Council fellowship to write a novel focussing on Australia's Spanish-speaking community and issues of migration and cosmopolitanism. Fernández lived for a year in Costa Rica writing the manuscript for this work but the novel was never completed. In the interview with *El País* previously mentioned, Fernández indicated that he was still working on it and hoped it would one day be published (Vaz). This *El País* interview was to promote the revised version of *Querido Juan dos puntos*, now titled *El contestador australiano y otros cuentos* and published in Montevideo by del Sur Ediciones. Of the eighteen stories in *Querido Juan dos puntos*, sixteen re-appear in *El contestador australiano*, along with four new stories that did not appear in the earlier volume. This new publication in Uruguay of stories written in Australia, some with explicit Australian settings and characters, others with Uruguayan or Latin American settings, provides a strong basis for reading Fernández's work as transnational literary production.

The term transnational, of course, is burdened with a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations. Stephen Clingman in *The Grammar of Identity* (2009) suggests, and then discounts as restrictive, the view that 'transnational fiction is written by, and directed towards, migrant and multilingual communities, who exist in multiple and in-between spaces' (8). Clingman, like many others arguing in favour of a transnational perspective, focuses a good deal of his attention on canonical writers such as Joseph Conrad, Salman Rushdie and J.M. Coetzee, whose work—while clearly exceeding the category of the national—is rarely read under the limiting label of 'migrant writing.' Although I agree with Clingman that the

