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## Forum: For Whom Do We Write? A Discussion about Format, Purpose, and Audience

Sebastiaan Faber

*Oberlin College*, [Sebastiaan.Faber@oberlin.edu](mailto:Sebastiaan.Faber@oberlin.edu)

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**Forum:**

**For Whom Do We Write? A Discussion about Format, Purpose,  
and Audience**

**Sebastiaan Faber with James D. Fernández, Palmar Álvarez Blanco, Cristina Moreiras-Menor, Cecilia Enjuto-Rangel, Simon Doubleday, Luis Moreno-Caballud, and Benita Sampedro**

In the spring of 2015, speaking at the University of South Carolina, I addressed the ways in which political changes in Spain have also changed the relation between academia and civil society. Looking at my own work as a Hispanist in the United States, I wondered out loud whether the formats available for scholarship in the humanities—the conference paper, the academic article, the monograph—are still appropriate, if they ever were, for producing relevant knowledge in our fields. It struck me that, as scholars, we rarely think about audience—and that this shows in our writing, which often needlessly excludes the non-specialist reader. This way, I suggested, we miss the opportunity to engage a broader public. Is this lack of attention to audience really something we can afford, I wondered, at a time when the value of the humanities is being openly questioned by those holding the purse strings?

David Messenger, who heard the talk, suggested I turn it into a “think piece” for the *Bulletin*. I liked that idea. Rather than continuing my monologue, however, I decided to invite a small group of colleagues to join me in a reflection on a set of questions that I think are crucial in light of the continuing threats facing humanities programs in universities across the globe.

Joining me is a mixed group of scholars from the fields of Iberian history and cultural studies, specializing in different time periods. All work in the United States. They include myself (Oberlin College/Radboud University), James D. Fernández (NYU), Palmar Álvarez Blanco (Carleton), Cristina Moreiras-Menor (Michigan), Cecilia Enjuto-Rangel (Oregon), Simon Doubleday (Hofstra), Luis Moreno-Caballud (Pennsylvania), and Benita Sampedro (Hofstra).

The text that follows is the result of an experiment: a virtual roundtable discussion *en diferido*. The protocol we adopted was relatively straightforward. I posed my questions in a Google doc; the participants posted their replies, in English and Spanish, over a four-week time span. Contributors were encouraged—but not obliged—to respond to each other’s posts. I translated and edited the final result and gave the contributors one last chance to adjust their replies.

**In terms of scholarship, what is the most exciting work you have been doing lately?**

**James D. Fernández (JDF):** “My work has taken a sharp turn toward archive-building, an activity that many people may find unsophisticated and boring, but that really excites me and provides me with tremendous satisfaction. I’ve become interested (obsessed?) with the history of the tens of thousands of Spanish immigrants who, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, ended up settling in the United States, in compact enclaves scattered all over the country. This is a very under-studied mini-diaspora, and the materials needed to reconstruct it can be found primarily in the family archives of the descendants of those immigrants. These family archives—photographs, letters, documents—are in danger of disappearing. If they are still alive, the children of the immigrants tend to be in their eighties and nineties; these children tend to take care of their parents’ archives, and they often hold some of the basic information needed to interpret those archives. But with each passing generation, these family archives say less, and mean less, to their owners, and many collections of documents are on the verge of the flea market of the landfill.

The archival project, which I am carrying out in collaboration with a Spanish journalist and filmmaker, Luis Argeo, has two thrusts: one part of the project involves scanning and processing of family archives, in an attempt to safeguard and make public the primary sources that will be needed to reconstruct the history of the Spanish diaspora in the US. The output of this part of the project will be a vast digital archive as well as publications (like photo books, recipe books) and exhibitions. The other part is almost folkloric in nature, as we attempt to explore through documentary films how descendants of immigrants interpret their family archives.”

**Palmar Álvarez Blanco (PAB):** “In terms of research, among my most interesting work this past year has been the book I am coordinating and co-editing with my colleague Antonio Gómez López-Quñones, in which 25 scholars from different countries and disciplines are participating. In the course of a year, the project opened a dialogue among its participants around the topic of *precariedad*. We asked everyone to define the topic, from their discipline, in a way that would be understandable to someone from outside the discipline. The central idea was to produce a general-interest text meant for informed readers. The book’s title is *La imaginación hipotecada: Aportaciones al debate sobre la precariedad del presente*. For us, the book has also included an important collaboration with *Ecologistas en Acción*, since it will be the first publication in a new collection called ‘Libros en Acción.’ The idea behind this collection is to include all academic texts and theoretical debates as long as they have some link with the main lines of *ecologismo social* in its broadest sense.

My second research project is connected with an initiative to create a platform that will also include students: a website tentatively called ‘Artivism the 21st Century.’ It is an open archive (freely accessible and without charge), updated and expanding continuously. The project has three objectives: (1) to offer a place to connect with the work of researchers, artists and cultural platforms, as well as with the artists themselves; (2) to offer teachers and professors models of workshops with artists; and (3) to offer artists and cultural platforms a free space and up-to-date bibliography, where others can access their work.”

**Cristina Moreiras-Menor (CMM):** “I still enjoy my research enormously, and it is a fundamental part of my academic *persona*. I am very interested in cultural critique, which combines the possibility of a detailed analysis of cultural texts (my work is mainly focused on film and literature) with arguments of a political and theoretical nature. My research feeds on history, political philosophy, and textual analysis. There aren’t many of us left who work in this combination, because—I think—our field is experiencing a turn toward the anti-theoretical. Currently I am interested in documentary film (especially in Galicia) as a starting point to investigate forms of work that idiosyncratically connect the worker with his work environment (the farm, the factory), its landscape and its surroundings.

The fundamental concern driving my research is the possibility of intervening in the experience of the present, even when I work with materials from the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I am interested in the question of historicity and temporality, and in textuality and the image as forms to reflect on human subjectivity and politics. My research is also committed to the idea that the university and the public sphere are not separate spheres (activism vs. academy is a false dichotomy; or it is a false universal). Instead, they penetrate each other constantly. The classroom can be seen as an activist space, and the public sphere as a space for thought. That said, I think it is important that scholarship in the humanities be actively and visibly connected to the political, social, and historical. The bridge that connects these, for me, is precisely theoretical thought and its language.”

**Sebastiaan Faber (SF):** “Most exciting for me in the past couple of years has been the opportunity to participate directly in the Spanish public sphere, while at the same time interpreting developments in Spain for a broad audience in the English-speaking world. Both opportunities have pushed me toward less strictly academic formats, and out of the isolated, solitary world of peer-reviewed scholarship. Working with Bécquer Seguí, I’ve had the chance to cover Spanish current events for *The Nation*. New online outlets in Spain like the magazines *FronteraD* (fronterad.com) and *Contexto* (ctxt.es) or the radio program *Contratiempo* (contratiempohistoria.org) have allowed me to experiment with

different, more creative formats and participate polemically in current debates. After years of working in a relative vacuum, with long delays between writing and publishing and a minimal amount of reader feedback, it is thrilling to have a shorter time to publication and broader response from readers, especially via social media. The new formats have certainly been challenging. But I don't feel I have had to sacrifice any nuance or rigor to speak of, almost to the contrary. My academic articles have rarely been fact-checked or copy-edited as thoroughly as some of this journalistic work."

**Cecilia Enjuto-Rangel (CER):** "In the monograph I have been working on during the last few years, I address how contemporary cinema and literature revisit the past, and redefine its historical legacy through the eyes of the children living under wartime conditions. In Latin American and Iberian cinema and literature there is a strong, growing trend that privileges the children's gaze in the reconstruction of the historical and the political memory of war and dictatorships. I explore how this trend has changed our ways of remembering, of coming to terms with the multiple generational gaps, and played a crucial cultural and political role in the transitions to democracy in Spain and Latin America. Children offer an alternative perspective to the reality they face, an imaginative take on the violence and their traumatic experiences; or they can also serve the director's need to smooth out the political complexities and nuances of the historical turmoil by simplifying the 'story/history' of the film. Some of these films perform a historical reading of the past that coincides with the political discourse of the neoliberal democratic governments, who to a certain degree condemn the violence of the past, but don't want to engage in the collective process of searching for justice.

I'm also excited about two collaborative projects: our reader on Transatlantic Studies, which I'm editing with Sebastiaan Faber, Pedro García - Caro and Robert Newcomb, and which we hope will be published next year; and the edition (with Pedro) of my grandfather's memoirs as a judge during the Spanish Civil War and in the trial of José Antonio Primo de Rivera."

**Simon Doubleday (SRD):** "Without any question, my most exciting—and all-consuming—project of the last few years has been the writing of a new biography of Alfonso el Sabio: *The Wise King: A Christian Prince, Muslim Spain, and the Birth of the Renaissance*. The book is coming out in December 2015. Because it's aimed at a broad educated audience, it's provided me with the chance for storytelling, relatively free from the shackles of academic convention; but it has also taken me deep into new areas of cutting-edge scholarship—the study of anger, friendship, humor, astronomy—which have been extraordinarily compelling. So many fields of life, so many threads which might be compartmentalized in our academic disciplines, converge on the life of one's biographical subject. Thanks to Alex Littlefield and Dan Gerstle at Basic Books,

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I've also enjoyed the most intensive editorial oversight that I have ever received: always encouraging, but equally demanding.”

**Luis Moreno-Caballud (LMC):** “Writing the book *Culturas de cualquiera* has been my most satisfying academic project of late, because it has allowed me to try out ways of working I never had the chance to explore sufficiently, but which seemed to me to be necessary. I have approached processes of cultural production that were hard to document and study with the methodologies of philosophy or literary studies, which are the ones in which I was formed. In the book I analyze plenty of materials from the internet, from YouTube videos to Twitter accounts, including blog posts, images, etc. I have also studied processes that are normally classified more as ‘activism’ than as ‘culture,’ such as the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) or the 15-M movement. For this I have had to rely primarily on my own direct observation (of actions, assemblies, or the behavior of people linked to those movements). But I have also had to use traces that are easier to cite, like articles, documentaries, legal texts, press releases, etc. I am in beginning to work more like an anthropologist or simply a non-fiction writer than as a ‘critic.’ What I find exciting about this is not so much an urge to escape a discipline or to switch or mix disciplines, but rather the attempt to link my work with the collective intelligence that is generated by political processes that claim their ‘cultural autonomy’—that is, their ability to self-represent, as against the tacit obligation to adapt to hegemonic forms of representation (those that we have inherited from the traditional, Western lettered tradition, which is elitist and patriarchal). Writing the book, I have also run into many other people that write and do research from positions linked to those processes of collective intelligence in search of a certain cultural autonomy. These include militant scholars, journalists, university professors, hackers, postdocs, interns, cultural managers, etc. etc. I have enjoyed contributing to the dissemination of the knowledge produced in situations in which technical or specialized languages are not placed above affective intelligence, mutual concern, or shared sustainability.”

**Benita Sampedro (BS):** “I am interested in continuing my reflection around two fundamental concepts, each independent although not altogether disconnected from each other: the archive and the ruin. The archive (fundamentally the colonial archive), in its technical and epistemological capacity, is an entity filled with ethical, historical and social implications. The immeasurability of the archive, the fact that it is impossible to apprehend in its totality in order to articulate a complex, totalizing narrative, confronts me with an impossible challenge, an abyss. Methodologically, this realization prompts a sustained critique of traditional historiography, particularly with regard to the uses and abuses of the material that is held by institutions. The institution I have in

mind, and the one that visit most frequently, is the Archivo General de la Administración in Alcalá de Henares.

My interest in the archive takes me to a politics of the commons, a politics of sharing, and a methodology of the collective: the democratization of sources. But it also drives me to erase the national, given that traditional archives are generally linked to the national (or the imperial catalogued as an extension of the national), and are configured around the institutionalization of information and the past. Working with or in the archive invites new arrangements, and an almost endless possibility of combination. But then again, the archive is of course by definition the greatest symbolic exponent of the extractive politics of research: the extraction of the sources. So how do we, as researchers, avoid the same cumulative, imperial logic? My most recent concerns are informed by these dilemmas, as I reflect on the very epistemological principles from which we work.”

**More generally, what is the kind of professional work that satisfies you most? What kind of work would you like to add, or do more of? What work would you stop doing if you could?**

*JDF:* “Fieldwork, collaboration, and attempting to find ways of reaching new audiences are by far the activities that satisfy me the most, and these are all activities that were pretty much absent from my training and my career up until now.”

*PAB:* “I agree with James. Besides my work as scholar and teacher I have also found great satisfaction in working together with people from different disciplines and cultural sectors, from co-creating an International Film Forum for my College and the community of Northfield, to organizing workshops co-taught with writers, artists and filmmakers, in both Spanish and English. All these forms of collaboration have deeply changed how I understand the production and teaching of knowledge.

Another type of work from which I have derived great satisfaction—despite the difficulties associated with a lack of resources—has been the foundation and coordination of the nonprofit ALCESXXI, la Asociación Internacional de Literatura y Cine Españoles Siglo XXI. ALCESXXI was born from the urge to recover and develop a critical practice that is reflective, open, plural, and transdisciplinary. ALCESXXI has intervened beyond the purely academic sphere. The membership includes educators, researchers, writers and filmmakers, publishers, students, and people interested in literature, film, and contemporary culture. We created the space because we saw an urgent need for a committed dialogue with our own time. From within ALCESXXI we want to encourage all cultural agents to be socially involved and assume their educational responsibility. For now, we have given these principles shape by creating accessible spaces to promote discussion and debate, as well as education, among

anyone interested. We organize a by-annual gathering and publish a free, online journal.”

*CMM*: “My fundamental work is writing and teaching; it is what gives meaning to my professional life. Both naturally imply collaboration and teamwork, either with students or with colleagues (through co-edited books, conferences, etc.). And of course both imply work in the archive: gathering and analyzing materials that will later be crushed in writing or classes and seminars. I like the kind of editorial work that allows me to formulate field-wide projects (this is what I am trying to do now through my collection ‘Constelaciones’ with the publisher Comarés) and to make a robust intervention in the field. It’s also very important for me to preserve a place for theory in a discipline that is increasingly moving away from theory.

I find it easier to write in Spanish, since it’s my native language; but North-American Hispanism is bilingual ever since the Spanish exiles arrived at these universities. I think this is great. I take on administrative work as an interesting experience from which one can learn a lot and that, also, helps formulate a professional vision within the context of one’s own university.”

*SF*: “As with Cristina, teaching and writing are where it’s at for me. Although I have been doing a good amount of administrative work, I have become increasingly aware of my limitations in that area. Still, heading up the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives for five years was a privilege. Helping develop ALBA’s work with high-school teachers across the United States opened my eyes to the possibilities of local outreach. And co-editing our quarterly magazine, *The Volunteer*, is a blast. There’s nothing more satisfying than leafing through a new issue fresh from the presses.”

*CER*: “I prefer writing in Spanish but I often find myself writing in English. I really enjoy working on my research, in archives and libraries, and collaborating with other colleagues. I’m also passionate about teaching and working with graduate students, and in particular my PhD advisees. I have seven advisees and I spend a lot of time reading their work and meeting with them, but I love learning from them, reading new texts and watching new films. I also agree with Cristina on the relevance of taking administrative work as a learning experience. I have learned a lot about how things work by participating in many committees both at my department and the University, and I believe we can reshape our workplace and improve our working conditions if we participate in the decision-making process.”

*SRD*: “I am deeply drawn to writing histories for a wide audience: in the first instance, I suppose, an English-speaking audience for whom Spanish history may previously have meant little more than the Inquisition. I deeply admire the career of people who—like Simon Schama, to take one obvious example—have been able to reach a devoted public audience while remaining loyal to historical

(and art-historical) scholarship: to step back from the hyper-specialization of modern academic culture, and to restore storytelling to its rightful place at the heart of the historian's profession, without any hint of 'dumbing down' (instead, asking questions that matter to people). I am a secret admirer of an older generation of British medievalists—Tolkien, CS Lewis—who were able to take the storytelling impulse into an even deeper realm (that of children's literature), but this may not be something I turn to this week, or next!"

*LMC:* "I like graduate seminars. I liked them as a student and I like them now as a professor. I think it's wonderful to work intensely on a weekly basis with a small group of people. I don't mean to say that the work is easy, to the contrary. I find the seminar format increasingly problematic because I think it activates an attitude of idealist critique toward the materials studied. When I say 'idealist' I simply mean that it is a critique that tends to erase its own place of enunciation, its material conditions of possibility.

In general terms, I am interested in everything in our profession that allows for a situated form of thought—that is, a kind of thought that recognizes its interdependence and materiality, instead of activating fantasies of originality or individual 'neutrality.' In that sense, I like the relationship with graduate students, the micropolitics of the workplace. I like to try to open up spaces in daily life in which what we do is not determined by competition with others or among ourselves. Spaces in which we can join with colleagues or students and, even if only for a moment, collectively rid ourselves of the fear of losing our jobs, or not finding one, and the fear of not appearing sufficiently 'brilliant' to the others.

I've liked writing in Spanish because it's easier, but also because it has allowed me to link up with situations of collective empowerment vis-à-vis those fears I just mentioned. Over the past couple of years, these spaces have emerged in the Spanish state (the 15-M movement, the struggle undertaken by the PAH, the processes that led to the creation of electoral platforms like Ahora Madrid or Barcelona en Comú, among others)."

*BS:* "I find most satisfaction in field work, community dialogue, and to return with the results of my research, with every publication, to the very place of the source where the research originated, for a collective presentation and discussion of my work."

**As scholars we are in the business of knowledge production. Are you satisfied with the most common media and formats available to you for this purpose --or the media and formats you are expected and encouraged to use-- such as academic conferences, peer-reviewed journals, and academic monographs?**

*JDF:* "I've pretty much sworn off academic conferences wherein participants 'assault' each other with panels of three or four dense and hastily read written texts. Those encounters honestly strike me as violent and unproductive as

they tend to be, rather than occasions for dialogue, showcases for cleverness and attitude.

Peer-reviewed journals and academic monographs still have a rightfully important place in our profession. Thankfully, though, their monopoly on the field of ‘appropriate’ venues for scholarly output is being broken up. Still, as a profession, we haven’t kept up with these changes, and we haven’t come up with a credible system for evaluating, recognizing and rewarding alternative forms of scholarly output, like blogs, e-journals, websites, podcasts, documentary films, exhibitions, etc. etc. etc.”

**PAB:** “I agree with James. The bulk of academic conferences have turned into networking opportunities or obligations to fulfill CV-related obligations for the university’s academic accounting. Only rarely is there is productive dialogue between presenters and audience. On the other hand, meetings among people from the same discipline do not encourage transdisciplinary approaches to the objects of study. This means that people work on the basis of partial knowledge, which I think is less than useful in our relation to reality. Platforms and collectives like ALCESXXI, by contrast, have replaced the conference format with one of gatherings focused on cultural interchange and education.

As far as academic publishing is concerned, what is problematic is the stigma attached to anything that is published collaboratively, digitally, or in an open access format. I also think that the peer review process could lose its anonymity. I think this would change how we understand the process of writing, evaluation, and research. I also think it’s important to accept new forms of publication (blogs, podcasts, newspaper or magazine columns, online platforms, etc.). This would help legitimize new channels and help democratize access to knowledge.”

**SF:** “I have to confess that I, too, am increasingly skeptical about the usefulness of standard academic formats. It strikes me as ironic that we, as scholars who specialize in (textual) form, should be so conservative in the way we think about our own modes of communication. In our work on film, literature, and culture we routinely acknowledge the power of creativity and imagination as legitimate modes of knowing and transforming the world. And we know better than anyone else that meaning is not inherent in a text or image but only emerges through its interaction with a reader or viewer. Why then, as scholars, do we insist on formats that limit our own creativity and imagination, and that rarely consider the audience at all?

For me, as a humanist, the basic elements of academic quality are clarity, coherence, originality, and intellectual integrity. But I have become persuaded that the most common forms of scholarly communication—let’s say an academic article for a specialized audience, or a conference paper—are not particularly conducive to those four things. They are often neither clear, coherent, original,

nor intellectually honest. Sadly, the obsession with quality conceived as prestige, and the temptation to express quality and prestige in numerical terms (citation indices, impact factors, rankings, and the like), have only served to fetishize conventional formats and outlets even more. I'm pretty sure, by the way, that this tendency is worse in institutions outside of the United States. In countries like the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, or Spain numerically expressed 'quality'—which often means publishing for non-existent audiences in English-language journals—is directly tied to public funding. Ironically, what drives this movement is a privatized publishing industry that cunningly exploits individual and institutional anxieties about prestige to make huge profits, while condemning whole generations of academics to a form of intellectual sterility."

**CMM:** "I also agree with my colleagues. We should come up with alternative models for conferences; I would like to see a more successful implementation of the workshop and the seminar as such alternatives. Concerning publication, I think we are in transition and that soon enough all formats that disseminate academic work will be accepted, whether it is the traditional journal or any kind of digital platform. There is room for all of that in our professional lives. Work should only be judged on its quality, not based on the format in which it is published. I admire blogs and all other formats that open up the horizon of our profession, and bring it closer, in a friendlier way, to the public sphere."

**CER:** "I completely agree with all of you, the twenty minute presentation in a huge conference is not really worth it, and I almost never find it a rewarding experience. And I also agree that things are changing and we should all consider the many ways of publishing our work (blogs, newspaper columns, etc...) as relevant as publishing in peer-reviewed journals. I'm not sure about the idea of not having anonymous 'peer reviews' when it comes to some forms of publications: there are pros and cons to an anonymous evaluation but I find that it is easier to receive an 'honest' critique of one's work if it's anonymous. If it were not anonymous, I fear that *amiguismos* and academic alliances would play an even greater role in the evaluation process."

**SRD:** "Yes, I agree that the conventional academic panel is too often a sterile 'dialogue of the deaf': too fragmented and directionless. It takes a good deal of focused coordination, and probably an equal dose of serendipity, to achieve an academic panel that really sparks intellectual electricity. I am fond of roundtables, in which a genuine exchange of ideas can take place. As for scholarly journals: As the founding and coordinating editor of the *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*, which is now entering its eighth year of publication, I naturally retain my faith that the anonymous peer-reviewed journal is a valuable forum for high-quality work. Often this work comes in the form of highly polished, well-chiseled, independent articles: many of which have been through the mill of revision. We rarely insist that authors accept all the demands of their

anonymous peer reviewers; but the process of responding to the reviewers' questions and critiques is almost always productive. Having said this, some of the most exciting issues to have edited have been those where we have broken from conventional formats--for instance, to ask some twenty scholars (as we did in 2012) a single question: "From your specific field of expertise, should the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa be considered a turning point in Spanish history?". The tenor and quality of the answers varied considerably, of course, but it remains the one issue of *JMIS* that has received fan mail!"

**LMC:** "I join in my colleagues' criticism of the standard academic conference format. I agree with Palmar that it would be better if peer review would no longer be anonymous. I would add that it should perhaps also be public and collaborative—that is, with the reviews made available online, granting the author and third parties to respond to the reviews publicly as well. Alongside the criticism of, and proposals for, specific mechanisms (like peer review, the academic conference, the processes of hiring and evaluation, etc.), I would very much like for these kinds of debate to have a shared analytical horizon concerning the impact of neoliberal capitalism on our practices. It is no coincidence that conferences look more and more like commercials in which every individual tries to sell their 'brand.' It is no coincidence that our students feel more and more pressured in the face of an increasingly competitive labor market. Perhaps, too, new light could be shed on the frequent discussion about a possibly larger impact of academic on 'the public sphere' if we consider that that public sphere, too, increasingly functions like a market.

In that sense, I think that what can significantly change the practices of academic knowledge production is simply to protect them from neoliberal pressure. There is no knowledge production without the material sustenance of the bodies that produce it. If that sustenance depends almost completely on mechanisms of neoliberal competition, with the resulting precariousness of labor and attack on the most vulnerable, then cultural production is condemned to reproduce neoliberalism. With this I don't want to diminish the potential of thought and intellectual work for changing the world—to the contrary, what I want to say is that it is never only intellectual."

**Who is the *implied* audience in your work? For whom do you write? Who is the *actual* audience (i.e., who reads you)? Are you satisfied with that situation? If not, what can be done to change it? To what extent is your audience the function of your *field*, your *topic*, your *approach*, or the *formats* of communication most readily available?**

**CMM:** "Any person, academic or not, who is interested in Spanish culture in the broadest sense of the word: literary or film critics; historians and philologists; political scientists, philosophers; my colleagues in the field and students of literature or film. Ideally I would like for the writers and filmmakers

on whom we work to also be hospitable readers of our texts. In short, a *general audience* interested in literature, film, politics, and modern and contemporary society.

I don't have, and would not like to have, an idea of an 'ideal' reader because I think that would imply an erroneous starting point for writing. But I am not satisfied with the current situation because I think that the general public isn't sufficiently exposed to our books. I don't think this is because our books are written in a language that is unclear or too technical, but because the publishers don't give them enough visibility.

I think my work is *not* shaped at all by my readership. That is, I don't write 'for anyone in particular,' although I would like for my work to be read by the types of audience I mentioned. What shapes my work are my interests: I write about what concerns me, what I like, what bothers me, or hurts me; I think that the scant access to heterogeneous audiences is due more to inertia and disciplinary compartmentalization (political scientists don't read literary critics who in turn don't read historians, etc.) than to the specialized language of each discipline. I think our language is hospitable to any type of audience and that we should not, under any pressure, adapt it to market values or effectiveness or public access."

**PAB:** "I write for any informed reader and, above all, I write to communicate and express concepts and ideas that I consider useful in terms of humanistic knowledge, using Sebastiaan's expression. I would love to think that the materials we produce can be accessed generally but the reality is different. I think there is a general lack of knowledge about the scholarly work done by those of us who are dedicated to cultural critique. This problem, I suppose, is due to different types of lack: a lack of communication or collaboration among research groups; of diverse channels to disseminate this type of research; and, occasionally, a lack of connection between the objects of study and the reality of the readers."

**CER:** "Readers interested in Latin American and Spanish culture would be my audience, but probably I end up writing mainly for other scholars and students who think about the topics that I work on. It was surprising to me to find out how through *Academia.edu* people all over the world read our work, and therefore, it is great to know that our audience is not limited to Spain, the US and the UK."

**SF:** "For me, the challenge is to write in a way that appeals to specialized colleagues as much as to an intelligent reader from outside of the field. I'm quite aware that this is not always possible. But I feel that the very attempt to achieve this goal has been productive. It has shaped my choices, not only stylistic ones (how to open a text, what language to use, in what medium to publish) but also in terms of topic and angle. Conversations among specialized scholars can be tremendously exciting and productive. But I also feel that they are not sufficient.

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They cannot be an end in themselves. If they do, we run the risk of entering a feedback loop in which self-importance and self-congratulation become the dominant currency in a self-contained economy of prestige. This is a danger that lurks in all academic fields. But I think it's particularly lethal for the humanities, which after all deal with topics that are close to people's daily lives and concerns. Humanities scholarship also has a greater potential to engage non-specialists—not just as a passive, appreciative audience, but as active contributors to humanistic knowledge.”

**SRD:** “The intended audience of my new biography (*The Wise King*) is an intelligent reader without any prior knowledge of Spanish history: someone who is ‘new to the conversation’. But I have often written, in the past, for a far more specific—frankly, a very small—audience; and there is surely a place for this, too. I was delighted to have had a piece about the thirteenth-century courtesan María Balteira accepted, a couple of years ago, in the journal *Rethinking History*; this was a highly experimental piece of narrative, which will certainly never be on sale in the airport, but it was exactly what I had wanted to write, and an intellectual/imaginative exercise which I was driven to finish. If nobody other than James Goodman, the editor of *Rethinking History*, and Robert Rosenstone (who I later discovered had reviewed it) were ever to like the piece—and I suspect that some eminent scholars may well have disliked it—it will still have been worthwhile.”

**LMC:** “With *Cultures of Anyone* I am trying for a book in an academic format that can be read in non-academic spheres, especially by people interested in social movements and the crisis of neoliberalism. I don't know if it will work. I guess that when it appears in Spanish, it will be read by more people not connected with the university, or that they will read at least some part of the book.”

**The so-called crisis of the humanities has inspired some to rethink the connection between academic work in the humanities and civic engagement (or simply outreach). Among many other proposals, some are pushing for humanists to direct themselves more to non-specialist audiences (e.g., the NEH public scholar program). As a Hispanist, Trans-Atlanticist or Iberian Studies person working outside of Spain, does the notion of civic engagement strike a chord? If so, what shape can or should such an engagement take?**

**PAB:** “What Sebastiaan writes is true; the category of civic engagement, properly understood and used, seems to me to be an important means for connecting the university with life. It is also true that, when misunderstood, it runs the risk of turning that reciprocal collaboration in a mechanism destined to maintain a relation of subalternity. In the case of the College where I work, civic engagement is already a practice occurring in a good number of departments, mine included. Personally, I have incorporated a civic engagement component

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into the study abroad program I'm designing and, as an academic component—academic engagement—in one of the advanced courses I teach.”

**SRD:** “I often think of the words of an article by E.N. Johnson, entitled ‘American Medievalists and Today,’ which appeared in *Speculum* in 1953. Looking over back issues of the journal, he observed to his chagrin that ‘*Speculum* was unstained by the sin of contemporaneity’; faced by the terrifying post-war prospect of a new nuclear conflict, he condemned the habits whereby we continue ‘attending to our own comfortable, irrelevant, esoteric, and academic busy work while the world goes to ruin and we together with it’. My own work experienced a dramatic turn to the political—to ‘civic engagement’—in the wake of 9/11. (I have co-edited several volumes addressing the relevance of the medieval past for contemporary crises and concerns.) I could not look at Haiti in 2010, or at Syria now, without the impulse to address these tragedies in my teaching, and in organizing other events on campus. But I would not want to see academic culture subservient to the immediate needs of the present, or the university reduced to ambulance-chasing. There is deep humane value in the pursuit of knowledge, and beauty.”

**One way to characterize recent political changes in Spain—since the foundation of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory through 15M and the new political parties—is to think of them as calls for, and attempts toward, democratizing spaces that were largely reserved for the elites: particularly politics, the university, and the media. Do you have an opinion or position on those attempts, and do you see any way in which they have impacted, or may impact, your own work or the way you see your work?**

**PAB:** “I think that for those of us who are devoted to contemporary cultural critique, it has been impossible not to study, historicize, analyze, and teach the democratizing process you mention. In my case, studying it has driven me to adopt new taxonomies, and toward the territory of a culture born at the margins of the circuits of the market. This turn has also allowed me to establish rich collaborations with collectives, creative artists and cultural platforms and has even changed the way I conceive my classroom. This whole process of transformation has also helped develop the project that my colleagues Edurne Portela, Steven Torres and I put into motion six years ago: ALCESXXI.”

**CER:** “Well, let’s see if I can get my act together and join ALCESXXI! I completely agree. I think that for many of us, this democratizing process is shaping not only what we teach and do research on, but *how* we do it.”

**SRD:** “I am hugely sympathetic to these movements, and to the work of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives among other organizations devoted to keeping the flame of memory alive. They have not directly affected my scholarship, in the sense that I work on a very different period of history, but the

ethical commitment and energy that underlies them is extraordinary, and inspiring.”

*LMC*: “I agree with Palmar: for me, these democratizing processes have been fundamental. I intend to work in the American academy but *from* and *with* the initiatives that are democratizing Spanish culture and politics.”

*SF*: “Important news from Spain always adds to our possibility to participate in the U.S. public sphere because it generates interest in the country and a need for context and interpretation—from the broad public, but also from our more immediate colleagues. The dialogues that this interest sparks don’t just give us an opportunity to share our knowledge, but the dialogues themselves, even with the broader public, are likely produce new knowledge and insight.

On a more fundamental level, the political developments in Spain have pushed me to think more explicitly about the connection between academia and civil society. This is in part because many of Spain’s new political leaders are themselves academics. More importantly, it is because the push for democratization of culture and politics in Spain has undermined the hierarchy between the academic expert and the thinking citizen, underscoring Gramsci’s well-known observation that all people are intellectuals, even if not everyone has the social function of an intellectual. This kind of populism—or anti-elitism—resonates with me because I think it lies at the core of the humanities. The kind of work that humanists do often allows for the meaningful contribution of non-specialists or non-academics in ways that many other fields don’t. This is why I think you could say that the humanities, broadly conceived, hold something like a populist promise. Trying to realize that promise strikes me as a worthy and urgent objective.”

**What’s your general feeling about the “health” of your field? Do you feel the pressure that many humanities fields are considered to be under? Do you feel that the field as currently configured has the resilience to withstand those pressures and adapt to changing circumstances? In that sense, do you feel realignments or new waves within our fields--like the digital humanities, or Transatlantic and Iberian studies--are positive developments? Are they sufficient?**

*PAB*: “As Fernández Buey wrote, I don’t think the humanities are in crisis but that, rather, it’s humanists who don’t know what their place in this society is. From a transversal and transdisciplinary perspective, I think we humanists should not forget the importance of our intervention in a dialogue that aims to create an operating knowledge about the environment in which we work and live. As far as different ‘fashions’ like Digital Humanities is concerned, I think that, provided they are well understood and employed, they can be a valid route toward establishing and promoting that dialogue.”

*CER:* “I totally agree, and I’m also in favor of Transatlantic Studies, Iberian Studies, the Digital Humanities, etc.—it all depends on how we practice that ‘transversal and transdisciplinary’ dialogue and how we define these new modes of doing research.”

**Are you concerned or involved with efforts to reform the way universities operate as institutions, e.g. at the level of hiring, job security, etc.? Do you believe that, as scholars in our fields, university reform is something we should concern ourselves with? And if so, should we primarily mind our own institutional space, or also get involved with similar struggles in Spain or Latin America?**

*PAB:* “I believe that departments should ensure that those in the most vulnerable positions (instructors, lecturers, graduate assistants, etc.) be fairly compensated for their work. And yes, I do believe that is important to participate in conversations about possible reforms affecting the participation of humanists and our work. That said, I also think it is essential that it be us who initiate those conversations that directly affect the academic practices we want to change. This, of course, requires dialogue and collaboration among everybody.”

*CER:* “Yes, university reform is our problem, we must reform where we work and how we work according to the new needs and new challenges that arise. And yes, getting involved in similar struggles in Spain and Latin America would be the ideal goal as humanists in our field by participating in a real dialogue in contemporary cultural politics, in this sense expanding our audience. As Benita eloquently argues, we must participate in academic politics and shared governance to change the practices of the neoliberal university.”

*LMC:* “Yes, I am very worried that precariousness is becoming the norm in the academy. I would like to help and participate in networks of solidarity and mutual aid among university workers.” Sí, me preocupa mucho que el trabajo precario esté convirtiéndose en la norma en la academia.”

*BS:* “Yes, the model of the neoliberal university permeates everything, it’s castrating, precarious, it narrows the limits of knowledge. We have become day laborers of the educational system and we witness day by day how the figure of the university professor is being impoverished and degraded through the process of ‘adjunctification.’ In programs of foreign languages and cultures, for instance, and most obviously Spanish (to address our specific case), corporate academic culture subjugates an army of badly paid, temporary teachers, turning them into cogs in a machine whose model looks more like a factory, of a fast-food kitchen, than like university education. This is a long-term conservative project. In the face of it, it is our responsibility to get actively involved in academic politics, in shared governance, to achieve concrete change, to be vigilant, through university unions and other mechanisms. At the same time, and alongside it, it is also incumbent on us to formulate an ideology capable of proposing thorough re-articulations of a

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political and intellectual kind—maybe something straddling social and political interpretation, on the one hand, and a critique of knowledge, on the other—from which we could collectively think our field. It is also important to generate new contexts and spaces for dialogue, from within and outside of the system, through multiple forums, formats, and media.”