

Labrador Méndez, Germán. *Culpables por la literatura. Imaginación política y contracultura en la transición española (1968-1986)*. Ediciones Akal, 2017. 680 pp.

SARA NADAL MELSIÓ
SOMA MÉXICO/NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Germán Labrador's *Culpables por la literatura. Imaginación política y contracultura en la transición española (1968-1986)* is a continuation of the author's decade-long research project into the forgotten archives of a countercultural imagination that was virtually erased from Spain's social memory as the country began its Transition to democracy. The project began with his 2009 *Letras arrebatadas: Poesía y química en la transición española* (Devenir Ensayo, 2009), a lengthy and erudite study of the pharmakon's role in the obscured dissident poetic voices that were active from 1975 to 1982. Labrador's two studies join a vast body of academic texts that have called for a critical scrutiny of the social and political costs of the Transition, now overwhelmingly seen as the culprit for a prolongation of sociological Francoism and as complicit in the obliteration of more radical democratic practices. Labrador's approach brings to life the experimental poetic imagination of the period as a crucial arena for the expansion and exploration of profoundly emancipated forms of life. His prose and the affect that permeates the text sets him apart from other scholars of the period.

Labrador's belletristic writing inhabits and ventriloquizes the language of both well-known and forgotten writers and musicians through a sort of poetic incantation: endless listings of proper names that produce a cumulative and melancholic effect through repetition, hyperbole, and intensity (with Pau Malvido, Eduardo Haro Ibars, and Leopoldo María Panero figuring as hallmarks). In the same vein, the book betrays throughout a fascination with the romanticized categorizations that structure its chapters: "adoradores del volcán," "hijos del fascismo y la esperanza," "irrevocablemente inadaptados." While the counterculture's affective landscape seemed indeed inhabited by regret, Labrador, however, turns that regret into a stylistic marker of a generalized *malditismo* that reinforces the myth of tragic individual destinies. Thus, the text bemoans the disappearance of a counterculture while fetishistically relishing in its spectralization. In this way, young dead bodies obtain a higher symbolic value than the lives of those who survived, aged, made mistakes, changed their mind, or quite simply did not fit any single one of Labrador's narrative sequences. Take the case of the two female artists briefly mentioned in the entire volume, the Catalan working-class lesbian poet and feminist activist Maria Mercè Marçal. The fact that none of the author's categories apply to Marçal is

symptomatic of the limitations of an approach that privileges a male lineage of *malditismo* à la Rimbaud, one that glorifies self-destruction and the cultivation of tragic “personas.”

For the same reason, neither the question of reception (published and unpublished texts are given the same weight) nor the emergence of collective forms of authorship play an important role in Labrador’s account. Interestingly, his account starts the year of the publication of Barthes’s “Death of the Author” yet the poets at hand all fit squarely in a romantic understanding of the poetic that the avant-garde has been intent on destroying for over a century now. If literature is to be understood with the full force of a disruptive event, as Labrador’s use of the term “bioliterature” seems to imply, it cannot rely solely on authorship as its defining category. The *habitus* the author so vividly evokes are collective productions, both conscious and unconscious. Given the centrality of bioliterature to the book’s argument, the role of orality or performance is significantly undertheorized. There is no argument as to why music and poetry constitute better models for a “bioliterature” than other genres and forms, yet the text relies heavily on their specificity. There is no question when reading Labrador’s examples that the voice and its musical, dialectical, and class inflections plays a crucial role in the constitution of the experimental poetic and political communities he brings to life.

This text could have been a brilliant oral history, where poetic and musical voices enact a performative choral monument to a dissident Transition, one that is experienced as an affective, temporal, and political dislocation. In a way, those voices could only address a future community. Their orality was by nature anticipatory in its refusal to inhabit a present that they confronted as a past filled with ideological commonplaces and mantras of stagnation—the precise goal of sociological Francoism, one that ensured its survival well beyond the end of the regime. Not surprisingly, Labrador’s readings of the counterculture’s musical archive are by far the most compelling—and at times bring to mind the poetic militancy of Belén Gopegui’s 2009 *Deseo de ser punk*. The best analysis in the book is the author’s beautiful and nuanced reading of flamenco singer Camarón de la Isla’s album *Leyenda del tiempo* in the introduction and, later on in the text, those of the Galician punk rock band *Siniestro total*.

Labrador’s emancipatory understanding of the poetic letter, and I would add of the poetic voice, relies heavily on Jacques Rancière’s political *poiesis* to the detriment of a temporal exploration of the anticipatory nature of avant-gardism and artistic experimentalism. Poetic potential is after all the direct result of its invocation of futurity, a call into being of a community yet to come. Thus, bioliterature emerges as a utopian technology for the production of emancipated lives that do not yet exist. In light of this, Labrador’s Benjaminian retroactive leap into the countercultural archive, the fact

that it is already mediated by the experience of the *indignados* of May 15' 2011 deserves to be addressed more fully. In the last decade, Spanish citizens born after Franco's death have engaged in a very necessary unearthing of Spain's radical democratic memory. Yet, it is the necessary incompleteness of democratic mimesis that allows for this kind of retroactive leap to take place in the first place. The question is whether one wants to inherit fragments of past or the futures contained in the past, relics or promises yet unfulfilled.

The overwhelming quantity, in both sources researched and sheer volume of a text that is well over six-hundred pages, does not make up for some of the ready-made assumptions that undergird the volume. A case in point is Labrador's use of the same chronological narratives of the Transition, together with narrow social identities and typologies. One could argue instead that the refusal to identify remains the key to the emergence of counterculture's collective political agency and that honoring the legacy of an event sometimes means leaving it undefined, to continue to resist its social categorization. Take for instance the event of Barcelona's libertarian summer of 1977, a stage where syndicalists, traditional political militants, anarchists and crossdressers coexisted, the countercultural energy of the event could not be ascribed to an entity among these groups but rather to the unexpected convergence of a messy and energizing multiplicity of identities. An avant-garde poetics requires desiring and proleptic subjectivities in the making.

Similarly, the Spain Labrador so deftly evokes seems to be permeated by experiences of cross- and co-temporality. Generations coexisted while inhabiting different times rather than neatly succeeding one another through a conservative perpetuation of the law of generations. Thus, the author's rigid understanding of *la juventud* as a sociological category which has been used repeatedly as a reductive and pathologized term to undermine the international cultures of 68 (as the rebellion of "youth" against their parents) underscores the main conceptual problem of the book: Labrador follows the official chronology of the Transition to the letter and in the end prolongs its generational narratives. In many ways, the Transition was above all a narrative machine of representation and social organization capable of instrumentalizing countercultural disruption into a culture of consensus. The fact that some voices became increasingly less audible in a Spain intent on accelerating cosmopolitan modernity as an unquestioned goal that left way too many behind—the country's death toll for drug users and AIDS victims remains the highest in Europe—is undeniable. The contemporary awareness and fascination for a countercultural Spain that was pushed out of active political life remains one of the biggest gains of the widespread critical reassessment of the *Cultura de la Transición* (CT). Paradoxically, the Transition's labor of normalization through cosmopolitanism and

neoliberalism also contains a political “innovation” of another kind, as Spain becomes one of the first European countries effectively to dismantle the left’s revolutionary aspirations while simultaneously proclaiming its democratic commitment. The Communist Party, which led to a large extent the clandestine anti-Francoist resistance virtually disappeared from the country’s political life, while the Socialist party rebranded itself as a neoliberal social democracy that preceded both Gorbachev’s *Perestroika* and the fall of the Berlin Wall. For better or worse, not all the innovative political imaginaries were progressive.

In the last scenes of Pere Portabella’s 1974 *El Sopar*, one of the most fascinating clandestine political films of the period, five former political prisoners belonging to different generations of anti-Francoist struggle sit together at the table the night after the execution of anarchist student Salvador Puig Antich. Towards the end of the dinner, Jordi Cunill, a young member of the *Juventudes Libertarias*, gives a nostalgic speech bemoaning the intensity of his time in jail in a language borrowed from the *poetas malditos* Labrador studies here. It is then that the only woman at the table, political militant Lola Ferreira interrupts him to alert him against becoming “*un asceta melancólico*.” The point she says is not to fetishize the past but to embrace the desire to go on and continue a fight that is far from over.