

GALICIA: NATION WITHOUT BORDERS, CULTURAL IDENTITY BEYOND THE MARGINS

Colmeiro, José (2013)

Galeg@s sen fronteiras: Conversas sobre a cultura galega no século XXI
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Understanding Galicia as a nation without borders seems to be the simplistic way of summarizing José Colmeiro's *Galeg@s sen fronteiras: Conversas sobre a cultura galega no século XXI*. It is, after all, the underlining principle of his book as he dialogues with the most prominent producers of Galician culture in the 21st century. However, Colmeiro's book is not just a transcription and recompilation of the several —and in-depth— interviews he conducted with contemporary Galician musicians, writers, visual artists, filmmakers, poets, etc. Galicia's *paradoxical position*, as both a peripheral nation, and yet a nation in constant contact with other nations, is in fact Colmeiro's overarching proposal. The interviews are set up as intimate conversations with some well-known figures in their respective fields as they openly talk about their own contributions to Galician culture, their personal understanding of their own role as producers of culture, and the place of Galicia in a global context. Colmeiro's premise is precisely the idea that Galician culture is produced through the encounters with other cultures, languages, musics, genres, etc. In other words, Colmeiro understands Galician culture as «[u]nha cultura aberta á mestizaxe cultural e á interfecundación das formas e dos medios de expresión, a escritura, a comunicación, a performance, a música, as artes visuais, como modernas formas de expresión e intervención cultural. Unha cultura feita dende as marxas pero contra as marxas» (Introducción). Colmeiro's concept of a Galician culture «sen fronteiras», or without borders, draws from a theoretical approach centred on a new paradigm of cultural identity that transcends the traditional —and confining— geopolitical definition of the nation. The cultural studies approach of *Galeg@s sen fronteiras* responds to current Galician Studies done in the British and North American academies, and, in that sense, this book is the first scholarly book written in Galician that also dialogues within that particular theoretical framework.

Each conversation is preceded by a short introduction to each of the interviewees, and their diverse oeuvre. Through these short but detailed accounts

of each figure's career and contribution to Galicia's cultural production, Colmeiro provides the reader not only with biographical information but also with a concrete aspect of Galician culture and identity that the particular interviewee illustrates. While the interviews are presented «coa azarosa orde en que tiveron lugar, co fin de manter a coherencia dos acontecementos políticos e culturais» between October 2007 and May 2008 (Introducción), there is a more organic and cohesive organization that corresponds to Colmeiro's understanding of national cultural production (music, literature, visual arts, performance, and poetry, to name a few). In fact, *Galeg@s sen fronteiras* breaks away from the more traditional concept of national cultural productions limited to only literature and music, for example, to consider other cultural manifestations like visual arts and performance as valid productions of national culture as well.

The role of music is central, in Colmeiro's view, to national consciousness. In the introduction to Uxía Senlle, for example, Colmeiro situates her work at different borders of musical composition and creation. She is the first one to be interviewed, but her particular experience puts her at the margins (and beyond the margins) of traditional Galician music. In fact, for Colmeiro, Uxía Senlle embodies the openness and yet the complexities of Galician culture as a product of crosslinks with other cultures, musics, languages, places, etc. Through music and ethnomusicology, Bieito Romero is a clear example of Galicia's ancestral culture and its influence in present-day Galicia. Colmeiro discusses with Beito Romero the role of Galician language in preserving the historical past, but also the role of preserving other traditions, and cultural practices, like Galician music, as they are essential to maintaining cultural identity. Bieito Romero laments, therefore, the lack of institutional efforts to promote Galician cultural productions, in particular music, and believes that such lack of support only hinders the true representation of Galicia to the world (beyond the already known symbols like *O Camiño de Santiago*, or Galician Celtic music). Mercedes Peón, on the other hand, fuses tradition with innovation and, according to Colmeiro, «[a] súa obra persegue a renovación do acervo cultural e a exploración e experimentación de novos horizontes sonoros» (Mercedes Peón). She insists that her music also eludes labels and, at the end of the day, she rejects borders and sees herself beyond the margins of musical traditions.

Some other figures, like Manuel Rivas and Suso de Toro, for example, are well-recognized as canonical Galician writers who also enjoy recognition beyond the Galician borders. Manuel Rivas, in particular, understands Galicia as «célula de universalidade» that connects and interacts with others. This

idea is also represented in Rivas' own oeuvre, which is well known for the «hybridity» of literary genres. Suso de Toro, on the other hand, rejects the label of «national literature» because it confines literary production to hierarchical powers coming from the State, institutions, publishing houses, etc. For Suso de Toro, writing in Galician about Galicia is just like any other writer using his native language and writing about his own country, and he refuses to think that his own language and culture is less than any other. Both Teresa Moure and Antón Lopo defy labels as well. Teresa Moure's work is clearly related to her commitment to Galicia's social, linguistic and cultural reality, while Antón Lopo's work «é fundamentalmente transxenérica, rexeita as fronteiras tradicionais e os límites marcados entre alta cultura e cultura popular, entre oralidade e literatura, poesía e performance, cultura literaria e cultura visual, o local e o global, sen respectar tampouco as ortodoxas fronteiras dos xéneros» (Antón Lopo). Both, nonetheless, clearly produce their works from their local reality but with a vision that transcends the geopolitical borders of the nation.

The figures beyond the most traditional definitions of culture (literature and music) are also essential to Colmeiro's understanding of Galicia beyond borders. They are key representatives of the hybridity of genres, media, language, places, etc. According to Colmeiro, Miguelanxo Prado's oeuvre is «plenamente galega na súa orixe e concepción» (Miguelanxo Prado), but it has also found its place within the international animation circuit. In his interview, Miguelanxo Prado focuses particularly on his understanding of artistic creation as a pathology of personal inspiration and also as social responsibility. Antón Reixa is an iconic figure of Galician urban culture as well, and his work is probably the most multidisciplinary or, as Colmeiro describes it, the most «antidisciplinaria, e polo tanto resiste a categorización rigorosa» (Antón Reixa). His work, nevertheless, has always been at the forefront of cultural production that vindicates the Galician national project by crossing borders (i.e. artistic, linguistic, visual, musical, just to name a few). According to Colmeiro, Xavier Villaverde's contribution to the visual arts offers a view of Galicia in tension between past and present, and his most recent films also move between in genres «modernizando unha das máis simbólicas tradicións narrativas galegas» (Xavier Villaverde). Xurxo Lobato, on the other hand, and his photography, has opened up Galicia to the world and «[a] súa cámara indaga na realidade galega, na súa historia e na súa moderna transformación, e as súas suxestivas imaxes invítannos a imaxinar un futuro diferente» (Xurxo Lobato). There's no doubt that for Colmeiro visual and audiovisual arts represent an important aspect of

Galician culture that most clearly illustrates the blurring of borders between genres, approaches, and traditions.

While *Galeg@s sen fronteiras* includes a wide spread of well-known Galician cultural producers who write, sing, paint, compose or perform, make video, film, photography or animation, Colmeiro recognizes that the list is not exhaustive as the criteria for the project «non foi tanto un afán de comprensión como un intento de comprensión desa realidade plural diversa» (Introducción). Nevertheless, the personal choices made by Colmeiro align with the impulse of a cultural studies approach and emphasize the impossibility of fixing Galician national identity within the confines of traditional theories of nationhood. Colmeiro's position complements the work of other Galician studies scholars like Kirsty Hooper, Helena Migueléz-Carballeira, Joseba Gabilondo, and Eugenia Romero, to name just a few, who have also noted the cultural, political, social, and economical transformations that have taken place in Galicia in the 21st century. *Galeg@s sen fronteiras* stems from the idea that Galician identity and culture is in constant motion and therefore it is shaped by and through movement itself. Colmeiro understands that the changes in Galician culture are the result of the social, political, and economical changes that have occurred in the world due to global influences; and the series of suggestive conversations with prominent figures like Uxía Senlle, Miguelanxo Prado, Bieito Romero, Manuel Rivas, Antón Reixa, Xavier Villaverde, Mercedes Peón, Xurxo Lobato, Teresa Moure, Antón Lopo, and Suso de Toro, are framed in this juncture of the local and the global. The exquisite metaphor of the «Rosa dos ventos» to explain how Galician culture is at the crossroads of cultural production for those that go away, those that return, travellers, fishermen, emigrants, and tourists alike, is also a metaphor for the confluence of such a diverse group of producers of culture. Each one of them, in their own particular areas (music, visual arts, music, poetry, literature, film, etc.), meets up with José Colmeiro, who becomes their interlocutor (more than interviewer), and offers the reader the opportunity to learn, and understand, Galician cultural identity in the 21st century. It is this openness and plurality of voices which makes *Galeg@s sen fronteiras* a valuable contribution to Galician Studies.

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