

Whitney DeVos

Forms of Belonging: Am(é)rican Documentary Poetry, Nationalism & Collectivity Beyond the State

Monday, Feb 26th <https://ucla.zoom.us/j/98025082113>
3:00 - 4:30pm Meeting ID: 980
Kaplan Hall 193 2508 2113



Whitney DeVos is a translator and scholar specializing in literatures of the hemispheric Americas, with a focus on poetry and its relationship to nationalism, the state, and social movements. She holds a PhD in Literature, with designated emphases in Latin American and Latino Studies and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, and has taught literature and creative writing at UC Santa Cruz, the University of Arizona, and Pitzer College. A National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellow, she currently lives in Mexico City, where she is studying two variants of Náhuatl and working on her first book, an interdisciplinary literary history of documentary poetry that bridges hemispheric American, Latin American, and multiethnic literary and cultural studies. She is also a co-editor of *Ruge el bosque: ecopoesía de Abya Yala/Afro-/Latin America*, a multi-volume, plurilingual ecopoetry anthology and digital humanities project aimed at a global hispanophone audience.

Poetry, claimed Benedict Anderson, has a special role to play in nation building because it fosters a "special kind of contemporaneous community." But how have poets approached communal belonging? This talk illustrates how writers around the hemispheric Americas have taken up the "stuff" of nationalism---print culture, bureaucratic documents, materials from state and local archives--to underscore that competing narratives of the past create and constrict the conditions of possibility for democratic life in the present. Known as "documentary poetry" or "poesía documental," this mode of writing emerged contemporaneously in English and Spanish and reached a critical mass during the 20th century. My book project, from which this talk is drawn, is a comparative literary history of this emergent genre. Approaching transnational cultural production in the Americas as intertwined and multi-directional, I theorize documentary poetry as a hemispheric network of texts that treat historical events as vehicles for examining the nationalist discourses underpinning specific myths of racial democracy. In reimagining collectivity beyond the state and its regimes of exclusionary citizenship, documentary poets such as Ernesto Cardenal, Aída Cartagena Portalatín, and Juan Felipe Herrera offer us visions of emergent worlds ungoverned by colonial violence and white supremacy, even as certain texts reify the coloniality of power.

