



Ficciones de verdad: archivo y narrativas de vida

by Patricia López-Gay, Madrid, Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2020, 244 pp., \$31 (paperback), ISBN13 978-8491921585 (Iberoamericana), ISBN13 978-3968690513 (Vervuert) / \$34 (e-book) ISBN13 978-3968690506.

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To cite this article: David K. Herzberger (2022) Ficciones de verdad: archivo y narrativas de vida, *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 23:2, 241-242, DOI: [10.1080/14636204.2022.2071008](https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2022.2071008)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2022.2071008>



Published online: 12 May 2022.



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BOOK REVIEW

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The space between fiction and reality is not easily navigated, above all when the lines of demarcation between the two suggest that the dichotomy is a false one to begin with. This is especially the case in the contemporary age of “alternative facts” and “alternative truths”, bolstered by technologies that have helped to create them. While archival information has always been vexed (by time, perspective, language, even the physical decay of documentation), the blurred lines of today between fact and fiction often create a messy reality that transforms mere complexity into overwrought ambiguity. Patricia López-Gay sets out in *Ficciones de verdad* to explore this confusing schema – a difficult task to be sure, but one that she navigates with a sophisticated eye and the critical nuance that it demands. López-Gay’s exploration of archival narrations per se is not new in the context of writing history and autobiography. Indeed, the use of archival material has long sustained both disciplines. What draws attention to her study, however, is her interest in newly minted technologies and a plethora of coincident narrations that create diverse possibilities for both expanding and subverting “archives” of the self. As she notes, she is drawn to the catchphrase “archivo, luego existo” (22), which forms the foundational impetus for her to explore how the self is perceived, developed, twisted and confounded within its relationship to time, history, fiction and text.

The specific focus of López-Gay’s project is to explore the “ficciones de verdad” in Spain since the end of the Franco regime, which are produced by writers she refers to as author-archivists. These narratives are hybrid in nature – essay, autobiography, *autoficción* – whose assertion of self and truth lies short of certainty and whose ambiguity often serves as narrative determinant. Her critical approach to narrations of the self has roots in much European and US writing that has sought to undermine the traditional representational comprehensiveness of master narratives, while Derrida’s *Mal d’archive* holds prominence in her understanding of the general nature of the archive. Her purpose is not to create theory anew, but rather to explore writing marked by a “sello autoficcional” in post-Franco Spain. Importantly, she will examine how various authors both reorder and create shards of life that allow for a largely diffuse narrative about the world that has been both remembered and lived in by the authors. She uses the first forty-five pages of the book mainly to lay out her theoretical tools and supply definitions of critical terms, a helpful but sometimes repetitive rendering of the thoughts of others.


In the second section of the book, “Fiebre de hechizo y autoficción”, López-Gay turns her theoretical framework into a practical guide for exploring a number of texts. As she has pointed out, her critical lens seeks out that space in these texts at the intersection of archive and self-fiction. She begins with a broad commentary on the link between photography and the archive, then proceeds to scrutinize the first known photographic self-portrait (by Hippolyte Bayard) titled *El ahogado* (1840), a pictorial rendering of the author’s imagined suicide. While on the face of it, the portrait appears to convey objectivity and truth, in fact it seeks to create and sustain indeterminacy. López-Gay then links this early model of self-referring to the broader context of autofiction in contemporary writing. This section ends with a

focus on Don Quijote and the wavering space between fiction and reality – terrain that to a large degree has been covered by other critics.

The two remaining large chapters of the book offer well-wrought commentaries on important contemporary writers. In the first section, López-Gay draws upon Jorge Semprún's *Autobiografía de Federico Sánchez* as the point of origin for autoficción in Spain. While much of Semprún's autobiographical fiction has been probed by other scholars, most often the contradictions and parallels between his life and his novels (especially the idea of his life as a novel), López-Gay offers new and sophisticated perspectives on how Semprún creates his autoficción and what it means historically, in particular as it relates to the political tenor of his writing. She explores the ethical foundation of his narrative and locates it within history and the life of Semprún himself – or at least, what might be extracted from his life and recent history as narrated realities.

The final section of the book explores the autoficción of Javier Marías, Enrique Vila-Matas and Marta Sanz. To a large extent, the common elements among these writers – within their many differences – turn upon what López Gay terms “un deseo de disolución del yo en la multiplicidad” (143). López-Gay's study of Sanz and Vila-Matas stands out in particular. While Vila-Matas creates an image of the self hidden behind and within textual fragments, Sanz and Marías seem to embrace more abstract terrain, where writing becomes both creative refuge for exploration of the uniqueness of the self as well as the site for the impossibility of defining it once and for all. Her exploration of the dislocation of reality in Sanz's fiction reveals only a confounded self and perceives the body of the self as an element of the body politic, while her analysis of Vila-Matas focuses on material reproduction and digital postproduction.

Large parts of *Ficciones de verdad* have been published previously (as often occurs with monographs), but the virtue of suturing these studies together lies in the explicit juxtaposition and implicit comparison of texts across the various sections of the book. López-Gay's approach to the fiction/truth conundrum is sound theoretically, and her practical application of theory to a variety of works makes her study useful as well as usable. She clearly does not set out to resolve the conflict that she underscores in the title of her study (“ficciones de verdad”), but she does succeed in showing that the conflict depends less on contradiction than on the messiness of how archival narratives in many ways mimic reality itself, at least the bits and pieces of it that always remain beyond the grasp of certainty. As her study intelligently shows, writers may seek to insinuate the self into existence through archival narrations, but the solidity of that existence, and even the desire for solidity itself, remain always in question.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2022.2071008>

