

## Introduction

The interview with Mary Louise Pratt (18–19 June 2002) is the first in a series of conversations selected and edited for *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* from the material I compiled under the title of *Foreign Sensibilities*. Two additional selections from interviews with Rolena Adorno (2–5 June 2003) and José Rabasa (12–14 July 2003) are forthcoming in the next issues of *Revista*. The full-fledged version of the project is comprised of about a dozen critical perspectives taking place in the vicinity of professional or academic “Spanish,” mostly in the context of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The interviews were conducted in either Spanish or English and typically lasted six to seven hours, sometimes more. All interviews were taped and transcribed, with total pages per interview varying from fifty to one hundred. This material was further edited for publication with the direct collaboration of the interviewees. Each interview engages with the personal trajectory, the salient production and intellectual change of the individual figure.

I wish to believe that the landscape set up by *Foreign Sensibilities* in the comparative game afforded by these individual perspectives may allow us to contextualize better some of the present dilemmas and the most pressing problems within the humanities in general and within the fields of Latin American Studies and Hispanic or Spanish Studies in particular. Timidity and silence—let alone the pre-conditioning of people coming into the profession—will not quite do when the livelihood of “Hispanic Studies” is at stake, if only to bear in mind the name of the journal that is willing to host an important section of *Foreign Sensibilities*.

In *Foreign Sensibilities* there is genuine concern about how the “past” fares within and against the (un-)acknowledged nihilism of an obsessively “modern” society. There is deep concern about how “Americanness” defines itself in relation to “para-Americanness,” and one can imagine various worlds associated with the various prefixes (non-, un-, para-, pre- and post-, even anti-), and how these dimensions may parade

their best clothes in public daylight, also inside academic environments, curricula, programs of study, etc. There is also keen interest in the institutionality of the bureaucratic and literate, the literary and cultural, coupled with a genuine curiosity for what previous generations might have done (*ubi sunt* the inspirational legacies that can be rescued in the face of present challenges and disorienting amnesia?).<sup>2</sup> *Foreign Sensibilities* wants to address the limitations of verbalism, professionalism, academicism and institutionalization, and to look at the conventional configuration of what I would like to call a “repressive ontology,” or perhaps a minority status, assigned, explicitly or not, to most of its practitioners within the not always friendly regime of Anglo-American academic intelligibility of “foreignness” with or without letters. “Foreignness” is thus to be understood in a rich variety of potential ways in the looming shade of any kind of nativism that might be circulating out there. There is also concern here with the accelerated transformations of “knowledge” and “education” under the fast-changing regime of capitalism (or modernity, or globalization, as perhaps common euphemisms would say it).

Pushing borders is something *Foreign Sensibilities* as a collaborative work would like to do, as a way of at least challenging slow change, inertia, patriotism, supremacy and xenophobia. Nothing is certain—and this is not necessarily a bad thing—about the triad of “language,” “culture” and “literature,” except perhaps the strong monolingualism embedded in the United States, which we still need to historicize in an effort to understand it.

The current disorientation, or crisis of self-identity, informing humanistic intelligence is not accidental, untimely, anecdotal, individual or marginal. It is instead systemic and structural. Aware of the fact that “intellectual” and “Spanish” are most popularly decoupled in the American unconscious, *Foreign Sensibilities* is animated by the intuition that anti-Hispanic forces are today stronger than the pan-Hispanic forces inside and outside university circles.<sup>3</sup> Not quite waiting for the official dog to confess to the biting, *Foreign Sensibilities* focuses on this critical condition of the creature still called, with or without a red face, “intellectual life”—be it autochthonous, implanted, translated, imported or more or less graciously adapted to the “home” of U.S. university, culture and society. This is the “home” where the majority of the intellectuals included in this project has made, or is still trying to make,

their professional living. It is also important to take stock of the fact that academic Spanish, ideally assuming an intellectual formulation, is not, and most probably will not be any time soon, a strong point of reference for American society at large (curious readers could check out references to academic Spanish in Huntington’s *Who Are We?*). No single academic “Spanish” unit that I am aware of is hegemonic in its immediate circle of institutionalization, be it by itself or in some uneven association called Romance Studies, Foreign Languages, Divisions of Languages, Cultures and Literatures, and the like.

You guessed it: the interviews comprising *Foreign Sensibilities* want to pluralize “Spanish”—not just the mere proficiency of the (foreign) language and not just the increasingly cornered Iberian affairs. In so doing, *Foreign Sensibilities* wishes to break free from the stultifying conventionality that is said to contain “Latin” in Europe and the Americas. But (geographical and social) referentiality can cut, like a sharp knife, at least both ways. The whole point appears to be exactly the opposite of collaborating in the appeasement of the intellectual vitality of foreignness that ideally should constitute a crucial part of who (we say) we are and (want to) do. So, learn, in the meantime, from the squirrel, and feed from the bird feeder when the house owners are not looking.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the Center for Latin American Studies at Stanford University for its generous financial support for this project. I also wish to thank Joan Molitoris and Diana García-Denson for their collaboration in the early transcription of some of the interviews. The following interviews have already been published or are forthcoming: “Ethics is the Original Philosophy, or the Barbarian Words Coming from the Third World: An Interview with Enrique Dussel” (*Boundary 2* 28 [2001]); “Sobre la diferencia colonial, o acerca de la emergencia de un pensamiento que no ha sido considerado como tal. Entrevista con Walter Mignolo” (Ciberletras [www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras](http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras), [December 2002]); “Latinamericanism within the Marxist Tradition of Literary Aesthetics. A Conversation with Neil Larsen” (“Historia Actual On-Line,” [www.online.historia-actual.com](http://www.online.historia-actual.com) [May 2004]); “About the Subaltern and Other Things. A Conversation with John Beverley” and “After an Intra-American Tradition of Native Intelligence. An interview with Gordon Brotherston” (*Dispositivo*,

forthcoming). An interview with Roberto González-Echevarría (21–22 August 2003) is currently being edited.

<sup>2</sup> Two possibilities among others in relation to the historiographic retrieval of past dimensions of intellectual life: Fredrick Pike's *Hispanismo, 1898–1936* and Richard Morse's *New World Soundings*.

<sup>3</sup> One recent example among others: Samuel P. Huntington's *Who are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*.

#### WORKS CITED

- Huntington, Samuel P. *Who are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- Morse, Richard. *New World Soundings*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989.
- Pike, Fredrick. *Hispanismo, 1898–1936*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1971.

FERNANDO GÓMEZ

## Re/Visitations of (Latin) American Geographies. An Interview with Mary Louise Pratt

This interview took place at Stanford University on June 17–19, 2002. The following selection was edited for *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*. The expanded version of the interview is included in a forthcoming book, *Foreign Sensibilities*.

**The Latin geography of the Americas according to Mary Louise Pratt**

FG: How would you describe your [own] geography of Latin American Studies? I do not quite see you attached to any one area or region in particular. You have done work on travel writing, also on *testimonio* narrative and university pedagogy, and also work about [or towards a] greater incorporation of women in relation to the post-independence Latin American essay form. Your work displays a predilection for the narrative and the short essay. Is this generalization in relation to Latin American geography a good thing or a bad thing?

MLP: Well, it would be a very bad thing if this [were the only thing] people were doing. One useful observation might be that I prefer to work with other people. My predilection is not to be a lone scholar. And so the 15 years I spent as a member of the collective that produced *Women, Culture and Politics in Latin America* (1990) was formative and intellectually sustaining for me. *Imperial Eyes* was born from a course that I taught with Rina Benmayor. You know, to me one of the key dynamics is this: if you are a scholar in Latin America, your work tends to be national. You don't have libraries that will support for the most part transnational or hemispheric archival research. If you are in Mexico, which is a highly developed Latin American country, you can only study Mexico in Mexico. And in Brazil, you can only study Brazil, really, so there are tremendously powerful, rich national, knowledge-producing, reflective intelligentsias that do wonderful work and that use

the archives they have there. And I think from here you have less of an ability to acquire that depth of knowledge about one place, you can't be there all the time, and living in the place is a key thing, the milieu. And so you do a different kind of work, which is [what] in Mexico they call "atar cables" [building connections]. And that you have an opportunity to do from here, because you've got the library resources, you've got a certain kind of distance, where you pull things out of their context, so they click together and intersect together and so you can do this particular kind of work of looking at intersections of a certain kind. And I see that as just a contribution to a much larger corpus.

FG: Is this transnational "atar cables" the only possibility in the US?

MLP: Well no, I mean it's obvious that many people are doing lots of other kinds of work; so no, of course not.

FG: But in relation to your work you would say that's how you operate, for the most part. Or that's how you like it better.

MLP: Well, in part it developed for me that way because there were several years when I didn't have a lot of mobility, a whole lot of freedom to travel, because I was raising schoolchildren. And I do think that if you're going to study a country or a particular place, you've got to spend a lot of time there. You just have to go. There are people who want to study without traveling, but that is not the kind of study I would want to do.

FG: What about your limitations or boundaries? What would these be? Say, you are not entirely seduced by poetry or drama. You do not quite go to speculations on the Baroque for example. There is not much [explicit] comparison between North and South America, and as I mentioned before, I see you mostly working on the narrative form [inside the genre of] travel writing. How would you set up the scholarly territory of Mary Louise Pratt?

MLP: Well, I think narrative has been defining for me, and I think that's partly because I've been a junkie for story-telling all my life. My generation of scholars was marked by the "Boom." It's fascinating to me now to watch what looks to me like a renaissance of narrative in this

country at least, and so now I've just been teaching Latin American Nobel Prize Winners, a freshman seminar, and I'm having the time of my life teaching poetry to undergraduates. But yeah, the parameters you laid out are accurate. I don't see it as a deficiency not to do one thing or another. If anything, I'm criticized more for not having a single specialization.

### About going (vital) places and staying in strategic retreats

FG: What else could we say about your imaginary and real territory? Are we to imagine the last 25 years as a retreat of sorts (perhaps self-defeat) of some academics in a more or less identifiable territory marked by labels such as "ethnic," "indigenous," "identity," "diversity," "minority," and "multicultural"? Is this the vital space, at least for the time being?

MLP: To me many of those spaces have been very vital and very important. People have experienced and complained a lot about fragmentation; I've never particularly suffered from that or found it a cause for suffering. What I always want to look at is, well, are we learning stuff here? For instance, have we learned a lot about how race operates? I think we have, that we didn't know before. You know, we forget that the humanities discover things, that we find out things that are important, and this new knowledge, very painfully, has been developing in the university. [It has to do] with the access to the university of new groups that were previously excluded. Those are the kinds of operations that are going to be bumpy in all kinds of ways, but we have to do this, it's very important in the long run, everybody's going to benefit. You know one thing I should say about this business of trying to make sense of what you've been doing for the last 25 years: it has seemed to me that when I'm finished working on a project, I'm finished with it [and I do not tend to go back to it]. When I finished the *Speech Act* book, I felt like I'd said what I had to say on speech-act theory, and that it was somebody else's turn to take whatever the next step was. And I felt that way with the travel writing too, that I didn't have any inclination to continue working with travel literature once I got *Imperial Eyes* done. It was like "Fine, this is my contribution to this debate, now let it go wherever it's going to go." So that's the sort of attitude I take towards my projects.

FG: How do you see yourself today in terms of problems, issues, projects?

MLP: For the last few years it's been difficult for me to settle on another large project. I think I have one now but I'm not going to tell you what it is (laughs). I don't know what to say right now in the way of self-assessment.

FG: Are there any stages, continuities and discontinuities, any breaking points, blind spots, limitations, blind alleys, lost highways? You've done your work in linguistics, [there is] your work on *Imperial Eyes*. You have already mentioned that [once the] work is done, you move on to other things.

MLP: This is not the kind of self-reflection that I have engaged in very much. I should probably be embarrassed to say that. I'm a critical scholar, that's what I do. The critique of society is important to me, the critique of capitalism is important to me. Aesthetics is important to me, artistic achievement is important to me. I suppose, at the bottom of everything, you could put language. I just do language, most of the time. For instance, I find it very challenging to integrate myself into visual culture. I really can't get interested in TV. I enjoy cinema, but not as an intellectual inquiry. So I think I'm a word person, in a very deep way.

#### About increasing the awareness of a plurality of places

FG: Places you haven't visited yet or you would like to visit? Places you still want to go? Places you have already forgotten? Places, in that sense of maybe something grabbed you 15 years ago and you did some work on it and then you moved on, for better or worse . . .

MLP: Well, there's nowhere I don't want to go. And there are places that I find very compelling. The Andes are to me a world that's very dense and deep in all their tragedy, gloriousness, history. Mexico I find extraordinary and compelling, some parts of Mexico in particular, but Mexico in general is to me an amazing country. And these aren't utopian places, these are places that are just very complex and fraught

[with problems and issues] but to me extremely compelling. Those are the two that first come to mind. I'm very eager to travel more in Africa. I've been nowhere in Africa except South Africa, and I would love to know more. I mean, there are so many places I haven't been to. I can't do them all.

FG: Let's imagine that you're in a classroom and you're teaching a course—it could be a pedagogical setting or not necessarily—what would you like to see yourself doing with the Andes and Mexico here in the US?

MLP: If you think about a pedagogical setting—you know what it is, it's probably something like [Gordon] Brotherston would say to you too—there are places where you can feel that there's a cosmos operating, that in some way there's a world where the things you see have cosmic significance and a kind of depth to them. So that might be what I'd want to try to get across to students, what it means to live in a geography that is just saturated with significance. So those would be the things I would try to get across. And you know why so many people are fascinated with the Andes? Because it's really a place where as an outsider you're somewhere else. You're somewhere else. And you're very superfluous.

#### About the humanistic business in the (un-)usual sense

FG: [Looking at] "Linguistic Utopias," what would "utopia" ever be in relation to the "graveyard of the foreign languages in this country"? The non-normative? The non-homogeneous? The non-androcentric? What would utopia, or the desirable condition, production or experience [ever] be?

MLP: Of language in the US?

FG: It could well [be that], because in this essay you're focusing on the idea of linguistic contact, so I'm just wondering what would the desirable thing [out of that contact ever] be, something like the production of plural cosmos? Is that what this (humanistic) business is about? Is that what you're doing?

MLP: (laughs)

FG: You go places, and you gather collections of various cosmogonies, and you put them on the table, and that's that, clap hands and say "Great!"?

MLP: No (laughs). You know, the US—maybe all you can prescribe for this country is that people have to keep working it out and working it out and working it out. The situation that you and I are living in the United States right now isn't like business as usual in the United States. We're living at a very particular moment in the history, which is this huge immigration thing that began under Ronald Reagan, and it's the greatest influx of immigration ever in the history of the United States. So we're living at a particular moment here, that's negotiating itself out. And in many ways it's been fascinating to watch that over the last 20 years. You just watch more and more English-speaking people learning Spanish over time, you watch more and more intermarriage go on over time, you watch people working out the arrangements for language in their families and so on, and there's this enormous amount of improvisation going on that's very creative and very interesting and that's just happening. And then you have all the policy fights, the policy debates which go on way higher up, while all this other stuff goes on below the radar screen of policy, right? So I can have a policy ideal for the United States, and it's easy for me to come up with something like that. But the reality of what's going on here is actually to me quite dynamic, it has very violent and tragic dimensions, much of it is oppressive, but it is just going on.

FG: If you were to draw up that policy, what would that be?

MLP: Well, I think the US is rather exceptional in its fanatical monolingualism. There are few places probably to spare, but there's an ideology here that is fairly entrenched that says not only that everybody should know English, which hardly anyone disputes, but that knowing other languages is really suspect and makes you a suspect. And I find that just tragic. It's not just that it's unfair, it's tragic, because it keeps the country from drawing on its own resources. So I would love to see a change in that. And it's really interesting when you go back to the 19th century because, of course, the US wasn't like that in the 19th century. A great

in San Francisco in the little cemetery there. I was walking with some friends and in that cemetery, which dates to the mid-19th century, for the most part, the tombstones are in English, French, Spanish, Italian, I didn't see any German, but it's very multilingual, and you think, oh yeah, San Francisco, 1854, it was like that. The monolingual ideology didn't set in 'til after—it was around 1900 and World War I. It seems confusing. So that's a big shift. I would love to see some multilingual turn happen on the policy in this country.

#### A few words in the shadow of Benedict Anderson

FG: That could [possibly] be a good beginning for a multilingual history of the US. But if I may say so, I find that you lean on Benedict Anderson quite a bit. You turn to him in "Linguistic Utopias" and also in "Women, Literature and National Brotherhood." I confess I don't quite see the appeal. What is it about him that you like?

MLP: The appeal of Benedict Anderson? Well, for me, he is a post I get to push off, because when I use him in those articles, I use him to disagree, or I'm using the limitations of his optic to enable me to designate another terrain so that [I can get to] the usefulness of [his work for me]. I do think that his idea of the nation, the fraternal concept of the nation, captures a real, existing ideology about nation-states. I find linguistic theory reproducing it in a certain way internally, and I find many writers in Latin America struggling with that ideology and trying to negotiate with it. So the usefulness of that paradigm for me is that it enables me to see these things in other people's writing. But as a theory of the nation, it's incomplete, it's very limited. What is the nature of your discomfort with it?

FG: I just don't think that his work is that good, useful or inspiring. And I have a follow-up on a couple of things here. So collectivity formation appears to be moving away from notions such as limitedness and sovereignty to things like speech community? I'm just trying to understand why people felt the need perhaps in the '80s to go to that kind of work, to break up any kind of straitjacket, be it nation or brotherhood. What is it about *Imagined Communities* that you or other people liked some time ago?

MLP: I don't know how to answer this question exactly, but I think the idea of imagined community is a potentially useful way for people to perceive themselves, to have bonds with large sectors and a shared world with large sectors of the population with whom they oftentimes have no contact at all. That was the big idea, right? For you, it's not a very original idea?

FG: For me, it is just thin work that fails to develop anything specifically. It does away with things like bureaucracy, for example. The single phrase of "imagined community" is like a catchy soundbite and nothing else. I don't know why all of a sudden it became almost ubiquitous in some sectors in Latin American Studies and elsewhere.

MLP: You mean institutions of bureaucracy aren't present enough in the work?

FG: That's right. They are not present, but also histories of institutions, also different frames [of cognition and intelligibility, also infighting among social groups inside and outside national boundaries], and even the changes among national units, among different scholarships, like the colonial dimension are completely missing in Anderson. But maybe the very notion of imagination helps you to break open, let us say, formal (institutional) walls otherwise taken for granted.

MLP: Well, I think it's the fictivity of it that interested people, [which] the notion of "imagined community" captures. That nation is to a substantial degree a fiction and therefore only needs to correspond at points with people's lived experience or with what's actually going on. And it's a fiction that helps explain or at least address, for example, the difficult question of "why would anybody die for their country?" That's sort of an interesting question. And the answer is what sense of belonging and desire and obligation can you create that would enable something like that to happen, that people would offer and be willing to do it. So, in a way, asking the question in that puzzling way, I think, was helpful in that it was the imagined character that was appealing.

### About framing the current moment in 2002 USA

FG: What would you say if I said that the current moment, 2002 USA, is [at least potentially] framed by—what I mentioned before—the graveyard of the foreign languages [read: non-English, non-History at least as institutional markers], post-canoncity, lack of satisfactory frames of intelligibility, post-textuality and the hegemony of the image, time-space compressions and accelerations, ground-zero of history, etc.? If I'm trying to imagine my immediate environment, I could come up with that.

MLP: Except for ground-zero history, which I'm not sure what it means, those all sound right.

FG: What I mean is that there is a repressed awareness of the lack of interest in historical (or diachronic) dimensions, or that history is [ultimately] immaterial, banal. We don't need it, we don't want it, don't bother me with it . . . If all the names over here [in the Californian landscape] are in Spanish, so what? The common attitude is "I don't care anyway, it doesn't do anything for me." Why the very name of California? Or Palo Alto, why Palo Alto? What does that mean? It doesn't matter. Camino Real? Doesn't matter. That kind of geographical disorientation—it seems to me, but I don't know if that's your perception. We live in a society in which social changes happen faster and faster and we move from geography to geography, so it's like geography's becoming less, I don't know if less defining, but it's almost like we are not place-bound by geography anymore.

MLP: And there's a real attenuation of place in many parts of the world, and it's a very [unfortunate consequence]. Notice for example how the tourist resort has developed over the last twenty or so years. A couple of months ago I just happened to be in Las Vegas for a soccer tournament with my daughter, and Las Vegas has been rebuilt as a pseudo-place [with all] those giant casinos trying to be self-contained fake environments . . . Anyway, this thing about the attenuation of place is a big experiential fact, and I think it's one of the things that makes, for instance, ecological environmentalism hard to sustain. But in many other parts of the world that isn't the case. It is [also] the case, [however,] that all over the world there's a proliferation of non-places,

you know, the airport, the freeway underpass, these kinds of transient or commuter places . . .

### Towards an egalitarian representativity of (scholarly) practices by women

FG: In relation to “Women, Literature and National Brotherhood,” but also in relation to “Don’t Interrupt Me: The Gender Essay as Conversation and Countercanon,” I would dare say that I see a somewhat paradigmatic way of operating, or even of a certain feminist “take” practiced by Mary Louise Pratt. Yes, you go to the frame—the most current accounts of the essay in Latin America inside a post-independence chronology—and you find it repressive and lacking. And you disclose the mechanism of androcentrism at work. I would say that this reading technique works, or perhaps we might [want to] call it a “wedge technique.” Yet what follows after this? And I don’t know if it’s a fair characterization.

MLP: It’s an interesting one. What follows is, potentially, a reconfiguring of the corpus of study and the development of gender as a basic analytical category. Both things seem very important to me, I mean, if history is important. Now if history is not important, in the way that you’ve said earlier, then none of this is important. [But] if history is important, then thinking history without the women in it is a really bad idea, it’s a basic misapprehension of history, right? So if a re-conceiving of history happens so that women are in the picture, everybody’s in the picture more fully. And in particular, in the “Don’t Interrupt Me: The Gender Essay as Conversation and Countercanon” piece, one of the things that I was trying to show was that in order to understand what men are writing, you also need to know what women are writing, that the men are in dialogue with women writers as well, so that the canon really can’t be standing on its own, that standing on its own as such is an illusion. And this is quite apart from the injustice of the exclusion. So it’s at that level I think that I’m pushing in those two pieces. And you’re right to put them together because in both of them I’m assembling a corpus that is very dispersed.

FG: Perhaps insisting a little bit on this, what happens the day after? What follows after the countercanonical impulse establishes the as-

physiacting limitations of the [ontology of] “what is”? If the “canon” is the status quo, or the given, or how things are said to be, after we recover the neglected material, have we learned to read it any better? And if so, how?

MLP: Well, no, what you do is you set in motion a process that will eventually produce meaning better. Perhaps that would be a better way to say it. One essay might produce [a partial] remapping, but one essay’s remapping doesn’t remap the canon. It moves forward, hopefully, a certain kind of discussion. The other thing I think that’s important is the recognition that canons are never stable [and] have to be seen as something that’s constantly under negotiation. Just in the vicinity of the idea of the canon, you want to look at [other things adjacent to it]—except maybe sacred texts, although not even there—and you could easily see that this canon mutates constantly over time.

FG: Is it fair to say that your work, in relation to those two essays, appears less interested in providing learning tools, alternative mechanisms, etc. for the full-blown interrogation of collective value formation or even its reformulation? I’m not aware that you have done this elsewhere, and this is perhaps my ignorance. In other words, the initial [inclusive] gesture is good, it’s like, where are the women here? Well, there are not many women here, so let’s bring them in. Let’s say, it seems to me that there is no follow-up—and correct me if I am wrong about this—to the first move, which one can perhaps call the representational move, almost like the quota move. We’re in a situation of knowledge . . . but the second move, which could be perhaps called the differential-qualitative or expansive move, has not been delivered in relation to your work.

MLP: Well, [this kind of comment] is strange to me. I find the women’s writing that I discuss in “Women, Literature and National Brotherhood” very interesting in literary terms. And if you have a project of studying the lettered culture and the way it has operated, then to me those essays of mine are a contribution to that project that would push it “más allá” [or beyond] that you feel is absent. I don’t talk about the Peruvian Magda Portal because there are no women there, I’m talking about Magda Portal because what she’s doing in literary terms with her own stuff is really quite interesting to me. And for instance, someone like [Gertrudis] Gómez de Avellaneda in relation to what the women

were doing with the symbolic scripts of Christianity was really quite interesting to me and very different in terms of how the 19th century was being “understood.” I guess my argument would be that, again, if you define a historical project, then that would be what brings legitimacy to it, not quite necessarily the representativity of women, although this is clearly one good point of entry.

FG: Isn't it also true that your analysis cannot quite break free—or does not want to—from the binary structure alluded before, which we could almost call in a parodic language the “pushy, bully boys and the cornered and silenced girls”? Isn't there, in the vicinity of the *criolla* gender essay, a bit of a male-female impasse? Or perhaps you would say, look, that's the way to do it at the beginning?

MLP: It would be an impasse if all those women hadn't written all kinds of other stuff. But they did. And so their participation in many other genres is really an important reason why there's not an impasse there. But you're right, I'm particularly writing about [other things], I don't bring in those other materials in that essay, it's true. So does that essay leave us at an impasse?

FG: Which is the male-female impasse.

MLP: What I ended up doing there to avoid an absolute impasse was to say that this has been a conversation, that these two lines have been determining each other. But where would that essay go next if I were to take it somewhere else? That [piece] was commissioned for a volume on the Latin American essay, and the next step there might be to go to the rest of the production of some of those women writers the way, you know, Francine Masiello and others have done recently with Soledad Acosta de Samper. Many of those women were really prolific.

FG: Any improvements to your assertion that “reading paradigms for the gender essay have not been widely developed” (“Don't Interrupt Me” 17)?

MLP: Have I noticed any change? No, but I could be wrong.

FG: So, in trying to understand the logic of the argument, “the gender essay” is the woman-manufactured inflection of the “identity essay” inside *criollo* sectors in post-independence Latin America . . .

MLP: Yeah, that sounds right.

FG: And it sounds almost like a brutal question, but what difference would that make beyond politics of representation? Maybe there's no just one simple answer and the question is wrong from the beginning, you see . . .

MLP: Well, what difference does it make to study the men's essays in the 19th century? Why study the essay? If there's any reason to study the 19th century essay, it would have to include women's essays. Different people have come running up to me and telling me since then, “You know, I've found this essay by Carolina Freire” that is definitely a Creole identity essay, it's not a gender essay, and they'll give me the reference for it. So people are then finding women and are also blurring that dichotomy that's too stark in the essay, and that's interesting.

FG: In relation to Gómez de Avellaneda, you write that her “main thrust is to strategically construct an alternative epistemological foundation from which to refute both the supremacy of secular rationality and the relegation of women to maternity” (“Don't Interrupt Me” 18). How far do you think you would go with this call for a dualistic-differential epistemology?

MLP: Gómez de Avellaneda is quite radical on that front. I've just finished an essay on her poetry. I've been reading her poetry alongside Heredia, who was her tutor, and there's a whole corpus of her poetry where she's rewriting specific poems of his. So I think her practice was defined almost in that way.

FG: In these two volumes, *Reinterpreting the Spanish-American Essay* and *Women in Culture and Politics*, 99.9% of the works are by women, so the de facto statement is that feminism is a woman's thing, right?

MLP: Well, those [volumes] have women in the titles, not feminism. They're about the literary history of women writers. This work doesn't

exclude other options. I don't think either of these works makes a claim that feminism is only about women. But alongside those essays, this was the time when feminist scholars were doing gender re-readings of men writers of the late 19th century and coming up with concepts like homosexual panic and this kind of stuff. So there has been lots of feminist work that isn't about women.

FG: You have already mentioned this, but perhaps you may want to add something more about the Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America, the Berkeley and Stanford connection in the 1980s and how that was taking place . . .

MLP: That collective has a great story. It was conceived in response to a perceived need at LASA. Because in the late '70s, when my generation started going to LASA, and this was triggered by Jean Franco, [who] had recently arrived here, we realized that women in the literature section had almost no voice in LASA. There were no women panelists, and it was very difficult for women to get the floor to ask a question, because all the men knew each other and, without consciously doing anything, they just kind of kept the dialogue among themselves. So we started the group to prepare a panel for LASA, and we persuaded the program committee to give us a panel that was going to touch on what gender analysis would look like in the context of Latin American culture, but it was quite a broad theoretical panel. And so that's how the group got started, we started meeting every month for 18 months to prepare our LASA panel. And then it just continued after that. We met once a month for almost 15 years and LASA was the place we went to with our work, and it became kind of institutionalized at LASA. People expected our group to show up and to give LASA a good panel, and I think over time the group did help open up a space for women, and now it's much more open at LASA. So that's how the group started. But for me it was wonderful, because everybody thought quite differently in the group, and so we all learned a lot from each other and everybody kind of corrected everybody else. The limitations of everybody else's thought were pointed out. So it was very productive and I still believe deeply in study groups as a way to do intellectual activity. I think the solitariness of what we do is a huge weakness in the humanities.

### A few quick words about the *testimonio* genre

FG: How do we bring the *testimonio* genre into this [general] situation [of the humanities]? I have in mind your piece "I, Rigoberta Menchú and the 'Culture Wars,'" included in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, edited by Arturo Arias, and "Lucha-libros: Rigoberta Menchú y sus críticos en el contexto norteamericano." Two things come to mind: one, the representational role Menchú played in all this as the vocal member of the Third World inside and outside the indeed poorly representative Western Culture reading list; and two, the thrust or eruption of what we could call the "non-aesthetic" [dimension] inside the literary sectors in the humanities, typically imagined as the trivialized space of the belles lettres. What else would you like to add? Here we have been talking about the humanities, let's say literature, culture, citizenship, but I'm wondering what do we make of the whole notion of *testimonio* as a genre, even the very figure of Menchú, because you've written about that.

MLP: You know, I was never persuaded by the arguments that somehow or other *testimonio* had no place in humanities classrooms. In fact, I've often felt that the attack on *testimonio*, both from the left and the right, had something to do with intellectual authority being threatened by *testimonio*. The idea that Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio* is not an aesthetically constructed text is just bizarre. Its force as a text has everything to do with the visionary, narrative and dramatic capacities. There's no question about it, in my mind. And to me, teaching the aesthetics of a testimonial text doesn't in any way betray its politics. I find it bizarre that someone would think that to teach the aesthetic dimension of a testimonial text somehow betrays its function or its purpose, because its ability to convey, to communicate across the kinds of distance that we're talking about has everything to do with aesthetic power. So, in a way, the justification for teaching Menchú is one that students will give you, because what American students will say is over and over again: "I had no idea." They will say that, and they feel like the book opens up the world to them. And that's another thing that jaded Latin Americanists who've been to Latin America many times don't realize perhaps as easily, that it opens up the world to students. Often they'll feel like there were some basic things about the world that they were deprived of knowing, and Menchú opens the window. And I think the

thing they are deprived of knowing is [that] the rich are rich because the poor are poor, and the poor are poor because the rich are rich. That is an astonishing revelation to many students who come to Stanford, let alone anywhere else, probably more to Stanford because these are very privileged people, many of them. So the powerfulness of that text is manifest whenever you teach it. So for somebody to come along and say that there's some principled reason the text does not belong in a classroom seems mistaken . . . I feel like one is teaching the text for the purposes for which it was intended. I've never been able to sympathize much with the debate about the validity of the *testimonio*, period, or the validity of teaching it in a literary classroom and turning it into a text, I mean, it is a text.

FG: But in general, against those who would say okay, Mary Louise Pratt, so you just want to put the Guatemalan indigenous woman against, side-by-side, Plato, that's not the point, right? The point is not just to say, I bring a few colorful names to add to whatever list you may be putting together, right?

MLP: No, in our class she was read with the Popol Vuh and with a Navajo life story that talked about the genocide of the Navajo at Fort Sumner out of US history and alongside Augustine's *Confessions*. So, that's where we located her, not alongside Plato. But it's true, the section of the course that included her text was in a quarter about the creation of the self, and the way you envision yourself in history. And she was there as a representative woman . . .

FG: But you would not like to say that you do an aestheticized reading of Menchú's narrative. Maybe you would say "I do a different aesthetics." Because when I think of your work it is, quite unlike other people's, not solely concerned with the aesthetic preoccupation. For Mary Louise Pratt, if I may put it this way, the aesthetic box is just one out of many.

MLP: Yes, I think that's true. And when I talk about Menchú, the term I use is, like I said, force or forcefulness of the text, and the aesthetics is a big and significant part of it, but not the only referent.

### About the perhaps disconcerting institutionalization of "Spanish" in the US

FG: What polite things could we say about the various constituencies under "Spanish"? What would the possible points of intersection and convergence ever be?

MLP: Within Spanish, you mean as in Spanish departments?

FG: Spanish departments, in the most generic possible way.

MLP: In a way what you're asking me to say is what opportunities I see in the field of Spanish right now for collaboration across some of the lines of difference that we have. I think there's a lot of interesting stuff going on, and one of the big places where it started was the re-reading of the colonial period, and the whole insertion of the colonial period into Golden Age studies to me was a point where a new profile for the field of what had been called Hispanism began to take shape. And the pursuing of that, the kind of following out of that initiative seems to me to be really productive, very useful and important. I guess I'm talking about the transatlanticization of Hispanism, if you like. And there's another cluster around modern poetry, with a center, for instance, in the Spanish Civil War, and its points of interaction between poets in Spain and poets in Latin America. So there are a lot of literary transatlantic genealogies that help to cross the Latin American-Peninsular divide that seem to be very interesting to me, or not [directly to] me, but to many scholars in the field. And so those are obvious places where I think stuff can happen.

FG: What are the achievements, possibilities, failures and promises of Latin American Studies? That may be again too broad a question to handle . . .

MLP: Yeah. You know, what makes it hard for me to answer that question is I'm someone who really has a deep appreciation for the Area Studies paradigm, and I say that in all awareness that it's a very heretical thing to say right now. And to me, where that paradigm is working at its best is when it creates conversations across disciplines that are held together by a certain geographic specificity. And a kind of complex,

multi-faceted geopolitical, cultural, historical, even psychological kind of grasp, or understanding, which can come out of that conversation. When [the Area Studies paradigm is] at its best, it's like that. Or, for instance, I remember a conference here where the mayors of several huge Latin American cities were brought in, and there was a thing about the Latin American megalopolis and the particularities of it. That kind of conversation held together by this geographically defined thing, and by, therefore, a language or a pair of languages, and a whole set of shared cultural things, those kinds of nexuses that you can create, to me this is the enormous potential of the Area Studies paradigm. Now, the extent to which Latin American Studies is able to fulfill that potential is open to question. One of the things people have noticed over the years [and I am saying this from the standpoint of someone who has been regularly going to LASA or who has been in Latin American Studies] is the culturalization of Latin American Studies. That is, as the social sciences have been taken over in particular by mathematical models, by systems theories, [and] by methodologies that work entirely by abstracting away as much as possible from the world, those disciplines have obviously seceded from Area Studies, and so the cultural disciplines have occupied more and more of the space. And I don't know where that will go. I have an optimistic feeling that those paradigms that abstract away are going to exhaust themselves, that whatever is to be learned from them will be learned and eventually the political scientists who want to discuss and try to predict the future of Mexico are going to have to go to Mexico, again.

FG: What are the achievements, failures and promises of *latinidad* studies?

MLP: In the US? It's a real work in progress. It seems to be the case that the comparative paradigm that was being developed here at Stanford is very successful. Certainly the trajectory that you see now is a move towards what you just described, "*latinidad*" out of *chicanismo*, *puertorriqueñismo*, *cubanismo*, *boricuismo*, I suppose. So you do see a merging kind of Latino formations in the culture. It's interesting, because those fields of study defined as fields have been the door through which Latino scholars have been able to enter the academy in the United States. And perhaps one of the main achievements of Latino Studies is just the presence of Latino scholars in the university. And that's a dramatic change, and very much still a work in progress.

FG: The issue is delicate. How could we talk sensibly about what I perceive to be at times quite explicit "anti-Spanish Latinamericanism" in which "Spanish" stands for the Iberian Peninsula? But this is clearly one possible combination among many: one could see anti-Latinamericanism among some Latino scholars, one could see anti-Latino attitudes among some Latinamericanist scholars, etc. Sometimes I'm reminded of Polanski's early film, *Knife in the Water*, in which three main characters, which could perhaps be allegorized as *hispanismo* (the rough adult male), *latinoamericanismo* (the young hitchhiker) and *latinidad* or *chicanismo* (the woman figure) happen to be on a Sunday yachting excursion. It's the limited space, the relative peoplelessness, the differences in class, gender, color, etc. that may help explain most of the tension. One could speak of relative underrepresentation, underfunding, understaffing of these sections inside the US academy. Or am I being foolish?

MLP: Well you know, the tension among those three things as you've described them, you've just described why it is enormously predictable. If you think about the entry of Latino studies and Latino scholars as a process of decolonization, you would never for a moment think of it as something that would be peaceful or easy. You would think of it as something that would produce a great deal of conflict. It was going to unleash racisms, prejudices of all kinds, it was going to create threats of all kinds, you can imagine it being exactly what it is, the effects that the co-presences of these things have on each other is something that isn't terribly mysterious. Does it need to be resolved in some way? Do we need to move ahead in some way towards a different set of relations? Yeah, that's the work of it. And that to me is the work that people are doing. And it means that there are enormous, extensive experiences of misunderstanding. There's conflict. There's rejection. All that stuff is the stuff that I guess you'd say a struggle like that is made of. So that's how I understand it, and what you wouldn't want is if you felt like it was stuck and not going anywhere. That would be serious. And it may be stuck and not going anywhere, I don't know about that. I don't think it will not go anywhere, it will go somewhere. It will go, either it will move ahead into some renewed thing, or there will be a backlash that will win. I mean the backlash will happen, is happening.

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