



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Latin American Scholar Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel Connects Latin American Identities Across Geography and Literature

As a critical reader and writer, Professor Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel at the University of Miami contextualizes colonial literature and contemporary Caribbean and Latino narratives, exploring issues of gender, sexuality, and migration. She speaks with Fred about feminism in colonial times, the literary thread between islands ruled by different empires, and what art and activism reveal about colonial legacies.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly, at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On our podcast, we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars, who travel the country for us, visiting campuses and presenting free lectures that we invite you to attend. For the Visiting Scholars schedule, please visit pbk.org.

Today, it's a pleasure to welcome Dr. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, Marta S. Weeks Chair in Latin American Studies at the University of Miami. Professor Martinez-San Miguel specializes in Colonial Latin American discourse and contemporary Caribbean and Latinx narratives, colonial and postcolonial theory, sexuality and gender studies, and migration and cultural studies. Currently, she is co-editing an anthology on contemporary archipelagic thinking and is working on her fifth book project using comparative studies to study cultural productions in the Caribbean and in the Pacific.

I'm delighted to say she is a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar for the 2020-2021 academic year and will hold the position of the Frank M. Updike Memorial Scholar. Welcome, professor.

Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel:

Oh, thank you so much for having me. I'm very happy to be here.

Lawrence: It's a pleasure to have you with us today. You have explored topics of identity and knowledge in the 16th and 17th centuries, all the way up to the present contemporary issues, and I do want to get to all of that, but first I want to start a little bit with your story, so tell us a little bit about where you grew up and who, as you look back on it now, influenced you to become a scholar.

Martínez-San Miguel:

Well, I'm a native of Puerto Rico. I actually have to say that my first influence in becoming a literary scholar was my family, because both of my parents were professors at University of Puerto Rico. And so, my father was a literary critic, but most of all he loved storytelling, and so I think I inherited his curiosity for literature, and so very early on I knew I wanted to be a literary scholar.

Lawrence: What was your mother's field?

Martínez-San Miguel:

My mother was also in language, but she was in grammar, more like she did a lot of linguistics and grammar. What she gave me was actually the love for proper language and proper writing, and she was very dedicated to that, so I think was a good combination for the career that I ended up choosing.

Lawrence: You took your bachelor's at the University of Puerto Rico, right? Tell us a little bit about what you studied there, and was there a particular instructor who was influential in your thinking and your development?

Martínez-San Miguel:

Yeah. I went to the University of Puerto Rico because at the time, knowing that I wanted to study Caribbean literature, I had the option of going to a university in the United States, but I wonder, why would I do something like that? And given that my parents were both professors at the University of Puerto Rico, I basically could go to school for free, and so I chose to stay, and I think it was great, because I majored in Hispanic Studies.

Lawrence: For graduate work, you came to the mainland United States and found your way to Berkeley. So, what was that transition like, coming to the Bay Area and taking up your studies at University of California at Berkeley?

Martínez-San Miguel:

I have to say I chose Berkeley because my brother, who's an engineer, had done his master's at Berkeley, and he just liked it. I didn't know much about the particular area. One thing I found very important from that particular school is that the two departments, I was in Hispanic Studies, but my mentor was in Comparative Literature, and at Berkeley these two departments shared the same corridor and the same building, and there were several joint appointments. So, I was able to take courses in the two departments, and for me that was very important.

Lawrence: So, let's talk a little bit about some of your work, and I would like to start with some of the earlier work, both in terms of chronologically for you, but also in terms of the period of history we're talking about. So, you've done some fascinating work on the structure of identity in colonial New Spain, what today is Mexico. Why did you find that to be a useful place to look to study the concept of identity and what makes up identity?

Martínez-San Miguel:

In a class I discovered Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who's a poet from the New Spain. She was a nun. And I fell in love with her poetry. She's constantly asking about her location as a woman in Colonial Mexico that wants to acquire an education, that wants to have something to say about knowledge acquisition. It was a complete change for me. It was totally unexpected. I never thought I was gonna be working on the 17th century. I always said that I was not good in poetry and there I was working with a poet from the 17th century.

Lawrence: Who was she writing for at that time?

Martínez-San Miguel:

She was writing for a European audience, and so that was what I found so striking. In many ways, she was trying to say, "I have something to say. I bring something to the table. And even when I'm a woman that is not allowed to attend university, and who supposedly doesn't have the level of education," and even at that time it was believed that people that were born in the Americas did not have the same cognitive capabilities. She insisted in saying, "I have something to say." Had she been a woman today, she would probably have been a philosopher, but that was not a place where she could participate, so literature became the space for her to talk about all these issues about knowledge for women and for colonial subjects in the New Spain or what we know as Mexico today.

Lawrence: So, in colonial New Spain, what role would you say the engagement between the Spaniards, the Europeans coming to that land, and the Indigenous people, play in the whole construction of identity? I guess among all of them. What impact does that have on the Indigenous people and what impact does it have on the Europeans themselves, like your poetess, who are engaging in some form or another with this Indigenous population?

Martínez-San Miguel:

Sor Juana does write about Indigenous characters and actually includes Nahuatl in some of her poems, and so there is a very serious engagement with the Indigenous population with the desire to claim she was a Creole woman. She was claiming that as a native of the Americas with a European education, she had better knowledge of the Indigenous and actually the Black populations in Mexico than someone that was coming from Spain, because she was raised there. She knew the culture. She was a participant of the culture. And so, I think that it's a very interesting detail to see how as we look closer, the beginning, they will say that she was basically a European writer. Some of my mentors studied Sor Juana as a European writer, and little by little she has become a Latin American writer that people are seeing the innovative interventions that she's making, the representation of women, Indigenous figures, and Black figures in Mexico in the 17th century.

Lawrence: So, I'm gonna push you a little bit on some of the terms here. European writer, Latin American writer. So, one fairly reductionist answer would be physically where is one located when one is putting pen to paper. I assume that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about a deeper kind of construct than that, to be a European writer as opposed to a Latin American writer. So, how would you describe those kinds of constructed identities?

Martínez-San Miguel:

That's an excellent question, because at the time period, the concept of Latin America did not exist. Neither did the notion of Mexico. She writes before the formation of the nation. She actually does talk about being a Native of the Americas, and so there is a very famous poem of hers that she writes close to the end of her life. It's the Romance 51, Romance 51, where she actually talks about her European readers and her as a native of the Americas, and how difficult it is for them to understand what she has to say. She sort of like says, "I'm unreadable for my European counterparts." You know?

Lawrence: She had a self-consciousness as an American, as someone from the Americas.

Martínez-San Miguel:

Yes.

Lawrence: So, to what extent can we think of her as a modern writer? Or is that just hopelessly anachronistic?

Martínez-San Miguel:

I think she's very modern, and actually she's writing in the 17th century. From the perspective of epistemology, it's a moment in which we start, René Descartes starts theorizing the formation of secular knowledges, and so in many ways, her claim is that her condition as a colonial subject and as a woman gives her a different take on particular knowledge production that needs to be taken in account, and so in a way, that's extremely modern.

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Lawrence: We were talking about her as a Latin American, to use the anachronistic phrase for her, or someone from the Americas, but now bridging into her as a feminist writer, and again, this was a self-conscious identity she had as a woman writer?

Martínez-San Miguel:

She doesn't use feminist as the name, but she talks about women's access to knowledge and her right to actually study and to ask questions that are basically trying to strive to gain some knowledge. She talks about not being able to go to university as something that she doesn't think is acceptable. She talks about women's education. And so, I think that it's before we have feminism as a movement, and actually some people will question the term when it's to refer to her work, but Stephanie Merrim has a very important anthology that she edited that is feminist approaches to Sor Juana, and so in a way it's now like a known fact that she's considered a feminist even before we had the particular movement that created this particular category.

Lawrence: So, let's come up to the present time now. One of the public lectures that you're going to do for Phi Beta Kappa as a Visiting Scholar covers the topics of literature and activism in Puerto Rico and Guam. Activism is a portmanteau of art and activism, I assume. So, how is activism particularly used and relevant in Puerto Rico and in Guam?

Martínez-San Miguel:

So, I actually learned the term from Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre, and they were actually writing on Chicano artists that use art to intervene in political debates or political context. And so, this term was perfect for the kind of work I wanted to do, because I found these two figures. I actually connected both of them. One of them paints military debris that has been left behind in Culebra, Puerto Rico, after the navy left, and so basically he paints this to make very visible the history of the island as a colony, but also he's in various ecological movements and some... This debris is basically damaging some of the ecology of the island, so to look for his name, his name is Jorge Acevedo Rivera. I found him and I was writing about him. This was by accident. I visited Culebra as a tourist in my own country and found these tanks in the middle of the beach, and was sort of like curious that they were so carefully painted and curated, you know?

And so, then I found out that Craig Santos Perez, who is a native of Guam that teaches at the University of Hawaii, produces poetry, has a series of books entitled From Unincorporated Territory, and he has written four books on that, and they are about Guam's very complex colonial history, and so he uses a genre that apparently is very common in Guam, which is that when there are public hearings, that the U.S. military, the U.S. Navy does decide what to do, because Guam has been a source of debate in the United States in terms of how to use the region. When they do that, people go and perform poetry.

Lawrence: Another topic that you are going to offer as one of your public lectures is what you call Archipelagic Studies. What does that field of study entail? What is it about that that is a particular identifying factor for a field of studies?

Martínez-San Miguel:

I got interested in Archipelagic Studies because after I devoted several years of my life to work on Caribbean Literature, I start getting Hispanic Literature, and then educated myself, pushed myself to learn about Anglo-Caribbean and French-Caribbean literature. These are not, although they are Caribbean literatures, we don't study them in the same place because of the language barriers. And so, once I did that, I started to think about the colonial situation. In some respects, islands tend to be treated similarly, and so both in the case of Spain and the United States, which are the two empires that I studied with more care, islands present several challenges, because there is a discontinuity of territory. But even if you think about the arrival of Columbus to the Americas, he first arrives to the Caribbean. The approach that they have to colonization is totally different to the arrival of the Tierra Firme, or the continental Americas, because in the Caribbean it's more extractive colonialism, and once they arrive to the Tierra Firme, then they start to settle and it's a different approach. And so, I was curious about it, like is it the Caribbean has a different colonial experience than other islands that have gone through colonialism?

And so, I started to read about Canaries, and about the Philippines, and about all these other regions, and began to find more or less, not exactly, there are huge differences, but the same challenges.

Lawrence: Challenges from the point of view of how the Indigenous population responds to the incoming? Or also challenges once the engagement of the colonial power settling in the area?

Martínez-San Miguel:

I think both. Yeah. I think both. The Indigenous communities, for example in the Caribbean, they didn't respect different nations. We separate the different nations. We separate the different Caribbeans. But we know, for example, that Arahucans actually established their chiefdoms in ways that sometimes included more than one island. And so, for them, the islands were a scenario of movement that was totally separated from what we temporarily define as nations.

So, that was one side, but then the other side is for the Spaniards or the Europeans, especially the Caribbean became this region of competition of the British, the French, the Dutch, and the Spaniards, you know? And even for the United States, when they arrived to islands, the discontinuity of the territory sort of starts creating a series of questions of how are we going to take or administer these overseas territories that are ours, but they're far away. They're isolated. They're difficult to control. People escape. And so, it becomes an interesting question from both sides that I thought was a

common denominator to take Caribbean Studies out of its own corner and connect it with other regions of the world.

Lawrence: Toni Morrison, the great Toni Morrison, talks about having to learn how to knock the little white person sitting on her shoulder off her shoulder, to stop writing for the white person sitting on her shoulder and to write an authentic African American literature. And of course, she discovers that voice and transforms American letters. Really is an astonishing body of work. But she's an African American writing within the United States. Now, your Caribbean authors are not within the continental United States, but they're writing within a milieu of relationship with the West. I wonder, do they have a continental American white person on their shoulder they have to knock off? Are they writing for a white audience? How do they deal with that same Toni Morrison issue?

Martínez-San Miguel:

Yeah. Well, many of them are writing, like for example if it's in Hispanic Caribbean, Puerto Rico for example, it's probably someone in the United States, but sometimes it's also this Hispanic identity that it's the claim to fame that some people will have, because you're trying to find a strong tradition that is well known by everybody. In the Anglo-Caribbean, it's interesting that many of the writers that participate in the formation of the West Indian literature that happens after the collapse of the West Indian Federation, many of them are in London. Many of them have gone away for many reasons, and they had to go away, because there was not a press industry. There was not a reading public for them. And so, they went away and then they came back.

The same thing happens in the Franco-Caribbean. There's the Negritude movement, and so there's this notion of the importance of creating literature that responds to the questions that are pertaining to the Caribbean, but sometimes that question begins in France, and then much later, in the case of the Anglo and the French Caribbean, we have the literature produced in Anglo Creole and French Creole. And so, there's the question, do you write in French or in English, so everybody can read you? Or do we write in our native Creoles that are read by less people but are ours, no?

Lawrence: Right. This is the Salman Rushdie question, whose language do I write in? Do I write in... The very act of writing in the colonizer's language means I've been appropriated to that extent. On the other hand, I want to be part of the discussion with that part of the world. There is no simple resolution to that paradox.

Martínez-San Miguel:

Exactly. So, I think it's more like instead of being one person, it could be more than one Western, sort of like tradition that calls them to participate, but at the same time it's just trying to create a public that I think is now there. The question is how do we get access to this literature? As outsiders, in a way.

Lawrence: On an earlier Key Conversations podcast, I was privileged to have Edwidge Danticat join us. She is, among other things, a distinguished member of Phi Beta Kappa from Barnard College, and of course an extraordinarily gifted writer and activist. Her involvement in

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Haiti after the earthquake is transformative in many ways. Where do you situate her voice in this body of work or in this dialogue we've been talking about?

Martínez-San Miguel:

Danticat is doing a beautiful job at looking at the gaps in history and actually giving literature that space, literature gives you the poetic license to complete what we don't have in some of these archives, or that we have in archives, but people have not had access to that. And so, for example in *Farming of Bones*, she actually explores the very difficult relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. And so, I think she has done an amazing job at allowing that imagination to fill the gaps and allowing readers to then understand and learn about that history from a literary perspective.

Lawrence: This is after all the Phi Beta Kappa Society. We're looking forward to having you with us this coming year, but we do a lot of reading lists. Of all of our publications that we put out online, and in the *Key Reporter*, the thing that people tend to focus on most are our book recommendations and our reading lists, so it seems to me, Professor, I should give you a chance to give our listeners your syllabus. So, if somebody was looking for a good point of entry into Caribbean literature, what's on the reading list? What do you recommend?

Martínez-San Miguel:

I would recommend Naipaul, and this is a very odd recommendation, because many people do not necessarily think that he's a Caribbeanist. He's said very harsh things about the Caribbean, but if you go the early Naipaul, and he has a novel called *Miguel Street*, it's a beautiful narration about the entire diversity of Trinidad and the different communities that coexist in that island, that not that many people... People know he wrote this novel, but then he becomes later on a writer that sort of talks about the derivative nature of Caribbean literature, or Caribbean cultures. He says something that insults many Caribbean people. He says nothing important was invented in the Caribbean.

But before he said that, there's this very important body of work about the intense and complex cultural diversity of the Caribbean. He's of Indo Caribbean, of Indian descent in the Caribbean, and so basically part of his difficulty sometimes is basically not finding places of identification in many of the Caribbean literature that has become canonical. And so, I will say that Naipaul would be a recommendation.

From Puerto Rico, this is not a new text by any means, but *Encancaranublado* is a short story collection by Ana Lydia Vega. She's a writer from the generation of the '70s, and I also like it because there she's actually trying to look at Puerto Rico within the Caribbean. And again, as a colony of the United States, we tend to look at the U.S. That's the culture that we want to imitate. Not everybody, but I'm generalizing. But she actually wants Puerto Rico to look at the other parts of the Caribbean, and so there's stories about Haiti, about Martinique, about the independence movement in Puerto

Rico that hasn't been... Many people do not even know that much about it, although there's some very important studies about it.

And so, I think it's a collection of short stories, a tiny book. You can read it in an afternoon. But it's actually very interesting how she manages to connect Puerto Rico to its Caribbean identity, and so that would be two books that I will recommend to start, to show a very complex Caribbean that is inhabited by people from almost all the continents.

Lawrence: I am so grateful for you coming in and joining us today. I know you're gonna have a great year as a Visiting Scholar and I know that the members of our campus communities are going to really enjoy the opportunity to have whole new worlds opened up to them through your work. Thanks so much for coming in and spending time with us today.

Martínez-San Miguel:

Thank you so much for having me.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Cedric Wilson is lead producer. Virginia Lora is managing producer and Hadley Kelly is the PBK producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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