

# Paloma Martinez-Cruz Seeks New Philosophers

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## SPEAKERS

Eva Dale, David Staley, Paloma Martinez Cruz

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**E** Eva Dale 00:00

From the heart of the Ohio State University on The Vval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.

**D** David Staley 00:32

Paloma Martinez Cruz is an Associate Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences. She is the author of *Women and Knowledge in Mesoamerica: From East L.A. to Anahuac*. She is the translator of *Ponciã Vicencio*, the debut novel of the Afro-Brazilian author Conceição Evaristo. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Martinez-Cruz.

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 00:58

Thank you so much for having me.

**D** David Staley 01:00

So, in your book, you argue that indigenous and mestizo women healers are custodians of a knowledge base that remains virtually uncharted. Tell us about the the main arguments of your book.

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 01:13

Right. I think it becomes clearer when I tell you a little bit about the process of putting the book together.

**D** David Staley 01:21

Please do.

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 01:22

I was interested in learning who my philosophers were.

**D** David Staley 01:27

Your philosophers?

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 01:29

That's right. As an undergraduate, I went to UC Berkeley and was trying to figure out how to do, kind of reverse-engineer who are thinkers were. And this came from a sense of not being allowed to take a place in any intellectual history that I had exposure to, any intellectual biography. Those works did not find their way into the humanities in any spheres that I was working in. So I was a Spanish major, a Latin American Literature major, and I did a Chicano Studies minor, and I very much was intrigued by Western philosophical traditions. And I kind of wanted to locate where, where's my Socrates, right? Going through also that formative moment where you kind of look around and you say, well, what's mine? And I think also, coming from an activist background, trying to reclaim is just this very urgent thing to situate, to assess your current moment, situate yourself going forward to imagine your own future. Really, you have to rescue your past that is the decolonial project, no? To imagine whole trajectories that get to take a place, that get to have visibility, that get to be part of dialoguem, no? So this, the Western philosophical canon very much looked to me like this looming angry face of Descartes, you know, that, that appears in his, in his works, you know, this, this angry white man looking at you and probably speaking in English with a French accent, saying, you know, you too will get it wrong. So that was how, for me, philosophy was being performed, right? And I wanted to see what do we have? Like, where's my Socrates? Where's my Thoreau? Where is that?

**D** David Staley 03:26

Did you find your philosophers?

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 03:29

I had to go through the process of decolonizing what I thought intellectual authority looked like and performed like. So, for a philosopher, that meant a public demonstration of your theories, or of your thoughts, your ideas, right? You're sharing them, I kind of imagine someone on a

soapbox, let's bring in Descartes, again, that image, you know, on a soapbox in the public squares saying, this is truth. Do you know? And you're gonna get it wrong, but I've got it right. So in my book, I talk about how this is a very centripetal way of looking at knowledge, looking -

**D** David Staley 04:07  
Centripetal meaning?

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 04:09  
Flowing towards the self, flowing towards the "I", the Western notion of the "I" and the self. So your name is attached to these innovations, and they are disseminated in a way that reflects back on you on this, you know, Western Construction of the eye, the self, no? In Mesoamerican conceptions of the self, the body, the community, that was not a priority. Really, when I looked at what intellectual authority was, how it was performed, it was centrifugal, it was flowing away from the self. It was very much a performance of self-abnegation. And this is what I found when I looked into the presence of public intellectual authority embodied by midwives, shamans, healers, authors and poets, right? This there was something very self-abnegating and in service to the community and in service of nature.

**D** David Staley 05:09  
How so? Self-abnegating in what ways, how is that expressed?

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 05:12  
So, yeah, the transmission of healing was more important than the transmission of an individuated name or self that was then to be published and distributed and entered into contest with other individuated names that were going to be published and distributed. There is something actually pathological associated with the excess of ego, and shamans actually would cure people of this excess of ego, right? Envãdia -

**D** David Staley 05:38  
As if it were a disease or-

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 05:40  
Envãdia is a disease, yeah. Envãdia, envy, right? Clutching, that hungry ghost that is always trying to clutch and consume,; that is looked at as a very perilous disease load. And so I was looking, I was trying to create a historiography through the lens of Western disease, the Western pathology, right? These Western constructions of the "I" that put, in fact, the self above nature. And I believe that that Western trajectory has led to so much of our disposable society. And the colonizers, when they saw native peoples putting nature above the self, or at

least trying to organize an equilibrium, that was looked at as primitiveness. So I think rescuing and learning from these native conceptions of the body and of truth and of nature, this focus, this emphasis on equilibrium, right, I think that that has a lot of potential to provide a pathway going forward. So when I talked about this whole trajectory, right, like, really reclaiming that history, that's the decolonial project. But not just to put it on a shelf and go, how nice that we know that that was there, but what can we learn from it as a pathway moving forward? What is healing there that can continue to cure the Western disease load?

**D** David Staley 07:06

So this is a history you've written. Give us a sense of the timeframe you're talking about, because it sounds like you're talking 16th century, but I noticed in the title of the book, it says East L.A., which I know was there in the 16th century.

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 07:21

Were you

**D** David Staley 07:22

Oh, well...

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 07:23

That to me, the subtitle, is my way of expressing that this is a journey, right? Like a decolonial project, I was looking around for my Socrates and all I found was Mexican women associated with cooking and cleaning, right? So I would make the joke a lot, well, you have your Socrates and your Plato, and we have what? The nacho chip, right? And I'm going to cycle back to that, because I have, the next book actually deals with the nacho chip, which I think of as a book end, because I was throwing it around so much that I was realizing that, how am I doing violence to knowledge around food production? So, I'm still talking about past Paloma, I'll get to present Paloma in a little bit. But to respect your question, we... I was there situating my, you know, these questions with me as a person from the northeast part of Los Angeles, right? Kind of formed with this, like, Chicano identity, a Chicana identity that was just very much my formation growing up. So going from there to the Mesoamerican ancestry, right, to looking at this to find out how I could decolonize how I think of the history of ideas. So that journey led to a historical perspective, because that's just what I needed, right? That was my hunger, was to have a historical perspective, was to have a lineage of the history of Mesoamerican ideas. And that led to me coming up with a way of organizing it from the Tenochtitlan midwives, right, performances of intellectual authority by women of pre-colonial Mexico City, Tenochtitlan or you know, the seed of the Aztec empire at the time of contact with the Spanish. Then I look into the colonial project, right, what did Iberian women in thought production bring to the table when Mexico became a place where those two realities, those two civilizing projects met in contact, right? So I look at Mesoamerican women, pre-colonial, and then I look at what the Iberian process was.

D

David Staley 09:36

The Spanish and the Portuguese colonizers.

P

Paloma Martinez Cruz 09:37

Yeah, the Spanish and Portuguese when they came to the Americas, what were they... what position were women in, right? Did they have the, I don't know, Protestant Cult of Domesticity going on? Did they have midwives and healers at the forefront of women who were considered by their communities to be imbued with spiritual or intellectual authority, right? Where were they coming from? What did they bring? And I found that they brought the ecclesiastic tradition of convent life and mysticism. So for women in Europe, Iberian Europe, medicine became professionalized starting in the 14th century. Now, that's where we see university education being imperative for people to practice medicine, which meant women were excluded, even though they had been practicing medicine as midwives and healers. They... the professionalization excluded women from its, right, from its practice. So mysticism became the place where women could publicly express poetic and spiritual innovation, right, where they could have a voice, because women were really not allowed to have a voice. So, you know, in the Spanish Inquisition, there's histories of women who were processed by the Inquisitors and came out with their sanctity intact through this technology of mysticism, that worked for Iberian women in a similar way that Mesoamerican healing had worked as a way for women to have a public place.

D

David Staley 11:16

And these voices are largely non-textual voices, is that correct? Your book is exploring the non-textual knowledge production, is that the sort of voice we're talking about here?

P

Paloma Martinez Cruz 11:28

That comes from performance theory, no, and performance studies, which helped me to understand performances as a cultural artifact, I could put performance besides literature, and look at these non-lettered traditions. I could look at the repertoire as cultural production, rather than just the archive. So we talk about that distinction. No, there's the repertoire as a way to transmit meaning and knowledge, and the archive, which was favored by you know, Western, Western societies, right, Western civilization. The repertoire in Aztec world was fascinating. They were the most performative society, right? You think of the top of the pyramids and the obsidian blades, no, plunging into chest cavities; they knew from a show, they knew from spectacle, right? So I was very interested in looking at the chronicles of these performative moments of these rituals. And I, in fact, identify the menstrual performances, because from the Western lens, they're looking for this individuated moment like this special, I don't know, Kotex moment between a mother and a daughter perhaps that is remarked someplace. But the Aztecs, their blood was performative, right? And so I located this whole parade, feast day, of young women of marriageable age. It says this in the different chronicles now that these are women of, now of marriageable age, and they're decked out in red and they're plastered in red, they have feathers plastered on their thighs, and they bring young maize cobs to the temple ChicomecĀtl. And people had, you know, really, anthropologists I very much admire had said

things like no special note is made by the Aztec society of the onset of menstruation, of puberty. And I figured that that just, we need to look at performance, we need to look at spectacle, to see where that note was founded.

**D** David Staley 13:42

Because anthropologists were looking for that in texts, they were looking for that evidence, and rather than looking at it in performance?

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 13:49

I think that the conception of the body and the Aztec insistence on public spectacle was really at odds with our way of thinking, of this as a private thing or a shameful thing, no? In Native American traditions, you do see more customs that associate menstruation with superpowers, like with a woman gaining power, and we do see a ritual like the bringing maize cobs to ChicomecAtl's Temple by all the young girls who became marriageable age, right? You see this as a way to celebrate all of the women and as a status that served the Aztec empire, not as this private fertility thing that happens at home that is, you know, viewed through the lens of shame, no? So the body has a totally different, you know...the body and blood was totally different, and these things were performed. They were not written down in these archives. You have to be able to look at performance and interpret performance to understand what some of these cultures are seeing with the meaning that they're transmitting right?

**D** David Staley 14:54

I want to turn to your work as a translator because I'm personally fascinated by translation as both a scholarly and a creative practice, and I'd like you to describe for us the process you went through in translating Evaristo's novel.

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 15:11

Yeah, the first thing that comes to mind inevitably is how humbling it is.

**D** David Staley 15:15

Humbling.

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 15:16

Yes, because you have this important work, this important voice that is in your hands, and there's a resounding, you know, awareness, knowledge that I did not deserve it, that I did not get right, who am I to say what she's saying to other people?

D

David Staley 15:36

Why go there, why have that sort of response?

P

Paloma Martinez Cruz 15:43

Kind of rule number one is, is we don't know anything. I think that is, that is a general way that I look at, you know, being a professor or a public intellectual is like no, I'm here to learn right alongside everybody else, right? These are things that I'm just trying out. So with translating Portuguese, a Romance language, with sounds that don't jive even with their other Romance languages, like there's this guttural things that are going on, this nasalization, and its Afro-Brazilian literature, so much is going on with silences in this book, there are so many things that are specific to the region. So working with my editor at Host Publications, it was very humbling, and very, you know, I wouldn't say that I don't deserve it, but you know, me, Paloma, you know, doesn't deserve that, doesn't get to do that. I think translators feel like this humbling, like, who am I to say what she's saying, no? That is a, in a more general, you know, version of that, right? And a more general manifestation of this, like, well, that's terrifying, I'm going to now do violence to this text, and do violence to also a political positionality that gets very little visibility, right, this just, you know, in, in Brazil, the politics of Afro-Brazilian literature, no? So it's in that respect that, that I had those, like, crushing feelings of like, okay, now let me see how little violence I can do to this text.

D

David Staley 17:23

So, explain what you mean by that, how does the translator inflict violence on a text? Not that that's your intention, I'm sure you try to avoid that, but what is that, what does that mean?

P

Paloma Martinez Cruz 17:33

There are, for example, Afro-Brazilian terms, that translating them into a more generic English, will strip them of their history, and their insiderness, right; their relevance, their position in northeast Brazil or in, you know, in Brazilian society, no? So coming from that place of like, well, now I have to take that away, and put something else in its place - that will have a different cultural and political valence. So, I have to unsay some things that the author says, in order to say them in a different language. And it's not all doom and gloom, because the prospect of opening a new readership to this work, is also giving it a new life, but it changes it, and so that is just that. There's just always, you know, you talk to translators, and it's a bunch of sickos you know, we're always very aware. We're very aware of the different ways that things can, you know, go wrong, and the ways that we can go violence. And I've read critiques of that translation, and I'm glad that has generated, you know, so much bibliography. Many people have really looked at the language and the language choices. And I know that with my editor, the language choices that I was making were vetted, right? And we're pretty specific, like, what patois would make sense in English? How would we get that across? So making those, okay, going towards something more generic, so that Afro Brazilianness is watered down, but because what Afro-dialect in English could replace it, right? And that would be embracing a regionalism that also represents a whole other historical and geographic trajectory that I didn't feel like I could put there, like shove in there, no, I mean, what would that look like?

D

David Staley 19:33

Well, you've already answered a question I was going to raise because on the one hand, if you didn't translate Evaristo, then unless I learned Portuguese, this is a work that remains remains foreign to me. By the same token, if I'm reading in English, what am I losing? What... is it in fact, is it in fact another text, isn't it in fact Paloma Martina Cruz's text?

P

Paloma Martinez Cruz 19:58

It always has to be that, you know, always has to be the translator's relationship with the text, which hopefully is generative. And also hopefully raises important questions about translation and hemispheric politics, and intelligibility and unintelligibility - important questions in the humanities, important questions in the languages. So I embrace all of everything that, you know if there's somebody who takes issue where a word got too generic, so that it was whitewashed, I'm like, yes, yes, so happy that this translation generated that remark. Do you know? It really, to me, is all positive. It's all part of that, like, hey, I mean, I'm here to get it wrong.

D

David Staley 20:44

It sounds exhausting. Will you do it again? Will you translate something else again?

P

Paloma Martinez Cruz 20:50

If there's a need? Absolutely. I mean, I do it, like, frequently, just in the community, no, in simultaneous interpreting when that's needed, mostly dealing with monolingual English speakers and monolingual Spanish speakers in the, like Columbus or you know, Ohio area. But literary translation is something different, right? Yeah, no, no, no, it is sensual and beautiful. And I really don't want to create a binary between the pain and the ecstasy, because like, birth, you know, I happen to be a mom and know a little bit about the subject. So it's like, that is the metaphor for creation, right? It does come, this agony and ecstasy comes together. And you can try and run from that, but that is the metaphor for creation, and I think that that's a powerful thing and I think that that's not something that I... I don't think, you know, the pain of it, those moments where you're afraid of doing violence, I think that's part of the poetry of translating. I think, don't get into it unless you're ready for some gruesome moments, right? Like a surgeon. But if you're ready for that, the bone, the gristle, and I'm talking about your own, you know, not for the, you know, weak of heart or whatever that expression is, you know, not for the timid, because you want to make sure you have a good team of editors, you want to make sure you're vetting and taking just so much care of this text like it is your child, right? Like you're watching someone else's child really, no?

D

David Staley 22:17

You've described your work, your practice, as applied humanities. Tell us what you mean by applied humanities.

P

Paloma Martinez Cruz 22:27

Now that you say that, I wonder where I've heard that in a way that is productive for me to stand by it and say, yeah, that's this is what this is. I'm not going to launch a definition that I feel like, you know, I have worked on or been vetted in a real accountable way. I realize I'm using that word, I'm talking to people in applied theatre right now, I have a project co-project directing Be the Street, which received Discovery Themes funding for us to do performance workshops in the Hilltop community, which is medium income of under \$25,000 and one of the highest concentrations of Spanish speakers in Columbus. So I think of applied humanities as not where we're emphasizing the theoretical innovation or the aesthetic innovation, we're emphasizing the transformative potential of this humanities work, very much steeped in disciplinary training. But, I think with a slightly different objective, right? For me, one of my taglines that kind of comes to mind is: we're not trying to get a community to make art, we're trying to develop the art of community. So I think that's a different, a different achievement, right? That's a different rubric. So I'm trying to find language for that, and I hope that if people have some, you know, if somebody has some bibliography they want to send my way and, you know, help me continue to cultivate that, because that's very much this project that is, that OSU, I would think, is very much a groundbreaker in funding this and helping us in Spanish and Portuguese, theatre, and comparative studies, and dance, find those tools to come together in an interdisciplinary way and put community first through the training, right, through the techniques of our humanities disciplines in contact.

D

David Staley 24:28

So your next research project involves nacho chips, did I hear you correctly?

P

Paloma Martinez Cruz 24:33

You know, I'm glad you asked. Well yeah, because I was going around talking about women and knowledge in Mesoamerica and making kind of this easy joke, right? And I wanted to unpack the potential of food production to be that empowering project where consumers, growers, producers come together to understand the significance culturally, economically, socially, of food production. Where mestizo and Mexican people and Latino people fit in the production of food in the food chain, but also what we consume and the ways that we need a cultural lens to look at some of these, for example, restaurants and products that are using Latino and Mexican and Chicano imagery, right? One chapter that's really, I want OSU folks to consider, because here in Columbus this came, this is a product of Columbus, right? East L.A. to Anahuac to Columbus, no? My chapter is called, "On Cinco de Drinko and Jimmiechangas: Culinary Brownface in the Rust Belt Midwest", so there you go, there's your nacho chip. I'm looking at, like, Speedy Gonzalez combo plates and just these, these traditions that I think there's a little bit of a lack of sensitivity and awareness of what these are doing, what these stereotypes in the culinary marketplace are doing, and I wanted to get at that with my new book.

D

David Staley 26:00

Paloma Martinez-Cruz. Thank you.

**P** Paloma Martinez Cruz 26:03  
Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

**E** Eva Dale 26:06  
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