Comparative Literature Professor Francine Masiello's Reflections

**Francine Masiello** is Sidney and Margaret Ancker Professor Emerita in the Departments of Comparative Literature and Spanish & Portuguese. She has focused on the relationship between politics and literature, culture under dictatorship and the transition to democracy, and, more recently, the idea of "South" as a problem for literature and philosophy. Gender questions cut through all of her writing, but her 1992 book, *Between Civilization and Barbarism, Women,*

*Nation, and Literary Culture in Latin America,* opened a scholarly field by examining the archival history of women of letters over two centuries in Argentina. Her most recent book, *The Senses of Democracy: Perception, Politics, and Culture in Latin America* (2018) focuses on the history of perceptions in culture, literature, and the visual arts from the 19th century to the present and again brings the gender system into the center of discussion.

**The Feminist Archive**

I had been living in Berkeley for several months when I was called for an on-campus interview for a faculty post in UCB's Departments of Comparative Literature and Spanish and Portuguese. Doubting whether my qualifications would suit the hiring committee's objectives, I was overtaken by worry. Among the hurdles were not only supplying proof of my Latin Americanist competence, but also meeting a set of collateral requirements for which I was marginally prepared: knowledge of a classical language and a strong commitment to teaching literature by women. After three years of college Latin, my memory could only drag up key phrases from Caesar and Virgil, and when Mr. Rosenmeyer, a distinguished Hellenist and one of the founding faculty members of the Comparative Literature Department, inquired about the extent of my training, I spurted out the commonplace, "Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres." Members of the interview committee nodded in wry satisfaction; they praised me as a consummate Latinist though the irony of their comments was not meant to be hidden. The other test was more severe. Ms. Richardson, a professor of Rhetoric, asked of my interest in teaching the department's new course on women in literature. Knowing that she was a Medievalist, I evoked the lais of Marie de France. It was an inauspicious start, I thought; yet for some reason, inexplicable to me, I was offered a joint appointment. Of course, I happily accepted.

Unbeknown to me at the time of my hire, the Comparative Literature graduate students had been lobbying to secure course offerings on women. I've always thought that I owed my job to their persistence. Through endless meetings and prolonged debate with senior faculty who weren't especially happy about disturbing the western canon, these graduate women at last succeeded in including women's literature as part of the Comparative Literature curriculum. Heroic, bold, and faultlessly defiant, the graduate students first won a lower division course, Comp Lit 40 to be taught by Graduate Student Instructors and focused on topics related to women writers or the representation of women in literature. They nudged

and pressed some more and finally convinced the Department to accept an upper division offering as well. Comp Lit 185, "Women in Literature," came to life. I was targeted to teach the first instantiation of the course although I have to confess, at the time of my hiring, I knew more of the angry feminism on the streets than of academic conversations about the work of gender in poetry and fiction.

Spring, 1978 arrived. My first "Women in Literature" course. I arranged a reading list that began with early modern texts and reached into the twentieth century. We started with the *Querelle des femmes*, Saint Teresa, and Sor Juana, and then moved toward experimental modernists, among them Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, and Zora Neale Hurston. The thirty women in the course, mostly students from the new Women's Studies Program that had been inaugurated two years before, were passionate about the material. They were excited about the representation of women's time in the autobiography of Santa Teresa; they understood the power of the female gaze that haunted Barnes's *Nightwood*; they found in the carefully crafted phrases of Stein a resounding call for rebellion. Far beyond my expectations, they understood the need to tie poetics and politics together; they understood the body of text in terms of the bodies of women. They sought to read for pulsations, rhythms, and repetitions that would expose submerged levels of textual/sexual meanings that might speak for feminine difference. I fondly remember this course for the affective and intellectual terrain that it opened; it let me see that we could change modes of interpretation if we read through the lens of gendered poetics.

This course was my introduction to feminism at Berkeley, to the ambitions of the women graduate students of Comp. Lit. who voiced their demands for curricular expansion; it connected me to the members of a fledgling Women's Studies Program and to the wide sweep of women faculty who believed in the promise of feminist action on campus. The first year was exhilarating, although I couldn't know at the time that this initial experience at Berkeley was to shape my career path, opening the doors to a future in which gender studies would occupy a significant role in my teaching, research, and writing.

As the semesters passed, demands for recognition of women faculty, women's work, and women's writing grew by leaps and bounds. By the early 1980s, women organized themselves on campus. Several faculty members from Humanities departments organized a study group on campus and invited me to join. On occasion, we met at someone's house; we traveled to other UC campuses to share

our work with colleagues. Among the participants, Barbara Christian was challenging the assertions of Henry Louis Gates; June Jordan in the mid-1980s was encouraging her students to express themselves in poetry and eventually brought them together in the "Poetry for the People" program. At roughly the same time (I can't remember the dates), Sue Erwin Tripp from Psychology, Laura Nader from Anthropology, and Herma Kay Hill from Law organized a faculty women's group (later named the Association of Academic Women) insisting on equity for women faculty and the guarantee of paid maternity leave with a "stop the clock" opportunity. The Berkeley Faculty Senate established a standing committee on the status of women and minorities. And much to our relief, Carol Christ took a post as faculty assistant to the Chancellor as Title IX officer in charge of overseeing campus compliance with policies that prohibited discrimination and harassment of women. Meanwhile, the program in Women Studies was growing under the directorship of Gloria Bowles, a Ph.D. graduate of the Comparative Literature Department and a persistent voice for feminist interests at Cal. It was located in a temporary barrack stationed near Moffitt library (T-1 to infinity, we called these make-shift shacks because they kept increasing in number and were somewhat of an eyesore; they accommodated programs of an interdisciplinary nature that no one wanted to house just yet in buildings of stone and mortar). My Comp. Lit. colleagues were also a source of inspiration: Jayne Walker, Assistant Professor of Comp. Lit. and English, was writing a brilliant book on Gertrude Stein; Florence Verducci, also Assistant Professor and a specialist in Classics, taught her students about the subversive female voices that endowed Latin poetry with its particular beauty; and Louise George Clubb, a senior faculty member of Comp. Lit. and Italian, impressed us with her wit and elegance and her commanding presence as a Renaissance scholar and interlocutor across disciplinary divides. I watched them from the sidelines as I continued to teach my CL 185 course.

In all of this, I began to ask myself, why hadn't the Latin American field been shaped by similar feminist excitement? Where was the history of women in Latin American literature of the kind advanced by scholars like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar? Didn't we have a trajectory of women's writing that merited exploration? I saw this as both a historical deficiency as a well as a theoretical gap. After all, the resistance to Pinochet in Chile had a worthy women's presence; the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo who protested the disappearance of their children by the Argentine military regime were held in highest regard, but Latin Americanist cultural scholars and critics had yet to craft a narrative reconciling these political

and gendered struggles with emerging literary forms. And what about work in the archives? Where was the post-independence feminist press of the nineteenth century? How could we begin to recuperate the letters and memoirs that would enable us to reconstruct the daily lives of women over time?

Prompted in part by the activism of Berkeley women campus wide, several of us in the Hispanic field began to think about questions of gender through a reading group of our own. With Emilie Bergmann and Gwen Kirkpatrick (Assistant Professors of Spanish) and Janet Greenberg, a recent PhD in Comp Lit who held a southern cone focus, we formed a group devoted to women at the intersection of politics and culture in Latin America. Women faculty from Stanford, UC Santa Cruz and UC Davis joined us. Working together for more than a decade, we met on a monthly basis, we took deep dives in the feminist archives, we re-read canonical and peripheral works in terms of gender exclusions, we offered lectures on Latin American feminism at conferences, we connected with feminists in our field throughout the United States and Latin America. Among our closest interlocutors were feminists in Argentina and Chile with whom we organized meetings, shared materials and ideas, and celebrated long-distance friendships. And then, of course, we wrote a book, *Women, Politics, and Culture in Latin America*. We discovered the joy and travails of collective practice although we soon realized that writing in a singular, anonymous voice bothered our publishers and readers. We wanted to publish our book without the authors' names on the cover; UC Press refused us. We wanted to deliver scholarly papers as joint efforts. Again, conference organizers protested our choices. We wanted to offer team-taught courses on Latin American women through joint efforts at Berkeley and Stanford. Administrative voices at both universities told us that this was simply unfeasible. Our collaborations gummed up the works. In any case, we prevailed. Group work was a matter of principle: we knew the value of alliance and solidarity in forming a theoretical vision. We appreciated the value of collaboration and eventually we succeeded. We taught courses together, we delivered collectively authored papers, we finally published our book under single authorship as “The Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America.”

I was among the fortunate junior professors able to experience this moment of transformation, to participate in the power of feminist practice as a collaborative long-term project. Comparative Literature was in many ways a starting point for what was to be an abiding campus commitment to ensure that women’s voices be heard, to allow scholarship on women to flourish. Among our greatest subsequent

rewards has been seeing two, three, and four generations of UC women—students, scholars, faculty—whose deeply imaginative and committed feminisms have continued the profound transformation of the field of comparative studies of literature and culture.