

Transcript for Episode with Aarti Madan

SPEAKERS

Joe Aguilar, John Galante, Aarti Madan

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++

INTRODUCTION

John Galante

Hi, I'm John Galante, I'm a historian of Latin America who specializes in migration and relations between South America and southern Europe. I also teach history and global studies at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, otherwise known as WPI.

Joe Aguilar

And I'm Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer. I specialize in speculative fiction and Chicano literature. I also teach creative writing and literature at WPI.

John Galante

And you are listening to *Crossing Fronteras*.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++

Spatial Humanities & 19th Century Argentina/Brazil

John Galante

So we're here at the PRX podcast garage in Boston, Massachusetts. And today we're joined by Aarti Madan, a specialist in Latin American literary and visual culture in the 19th century and really through to the present. She's primarily focused on spatial and environmental humanities concepts that hope we can get into some or we will get into some for sure. She's also an associate professor of Spanish at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, which is where Joe and I also work. So she's also a friend. She was raised in Tennessee, in an Indian household, and has lived a lot a bunch of other places as well.

Aarti Madan

Thank you both for having me here. today. I feel incredibly honored.

Joe Aguilar

I have a question about your interest in the spatial humanities? How you found your way into that particular area?

Aarti Madan

So my folks, I have to step back one sort of piece both, I think regionally, spatially temporally. And that goes to the story of, of migration that my family experienced. So my grandparents, and my father were all based in Pakistan. So my dad was born in June of 1947. And partition happened in August of 1947. So much of my family mythology is crafted around this forced exile and departure from the land in which they had been I brought up the land which they were farmers, so the land they cultivated and they were attached to.

So I've always been really interested in what it means to be from a space, from a land, in no small part because that history of my family has meant that we have been nomadic, generations of us have just moved around. And that's okay, it's the norm, it's not like we just need to stay put. So I've always been interested in how the space you're in might influence your creativity, how it might influence your sense of identity, your sense of self, who you are, and how you conceptualize your way of being in the world.

I became interested in the special humanities, in a more creative way, when I was doing my senior seminar. I had a minor in creative writing, and I did a senior seminar that was focused on the creative process, and got to thinking a lot about the way spirit different spaces might inform the ways in which we create. So that was my senior year. And that was my first sort of thinking of space, not just as natural space or an environment, but actually like the physical space where you might be, the writing I produced in this space of four gray walls is going to be very different from what I produced sitting next to a river, right. So that was sort of my first foray on a very basic level into the spatial humanities.

Increasingly, though, I became interested in the political implications of it of how different swaths of land are taken from people and what that means in terms of generations of people and how they're affected by that deterritorialization. And so I think the entire trajectory of my scholarship has really been focused on understanding how nations in particular craft identities that are spatially informed how they try to influence those identities, but then how you might have key players coming from below who shift that narrative and take official narratives of the nation and make their own.

So, you know, I think my trajectory as a scholar is going from thinking about space in this kind of very official sense of say, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Euclides da Cunha in Brazil and these really official narratives of, of space. And then moving on into my later scholarship, thinking about, you know, women of color, these street artists who have taken it upon themselves to reappropriate spaces that they've been excluded from.

John Galante

Yeah, I want to ask you a little bit about Sarmiento, you know. For those who don't know, Sarmiento is a sort of founding intellectual father maybe of Argentina, you could compare him to a number of people in US history for reference. But I would say Jefferson is maybe, you know, kind of an ideological or even just the way that he was kind of an intellectual and also a political leader. I was thinking about how actually people perceived space differently, because of different technologies, because of different access to maps, access to technologies. You mentioned at one point in some of your writing, exploring the unknown was something that I grabbed on to and I wondered sort of what studying past conceptions of geography have kind of taught you about how we conceive space, or how people used to conceive space, or different perceptions of space and geography.

Aarti Madan

I think that one of the most formative ideas I've gleaned from my research into Sarmiento and ideas of space is how much there is a verticality to way to the way in which hegemonic powers the state conceive of space, it's always from above, and it's always trying to account for everything that's there in a way to monetize it, right? So it's this in engagement with space that that is almost hierarchical. And

you know, there's the famous book seeing like a state right, so it's everything is looking, looking down. And even our relationship with a map is from above, right?

I think one of the things I've found most most fascinating about indigenous conceptualizations of space and of maps in particular, is it's based on being on the ground. So it's horizontal. And it's the dominant organ is not the eye, but rather the foot. It's about walking and experiencing the space and the surroundings in a way that is environmentally attuned, rather than looking from above with that detachment, right? So I think for me, it's become a real sort of interesting and illuminating way to think of the ways in which we relate with spaces where you can have attachment, if you are on the ground and taking it in in a way that you're you're absorbing and feeling in a way that's, it's a, it's a phenomenological experience, rather than this, this, this verticality that is looking to chart and make gridlines.

You know, the objective of Sarmiento was very much to order the space of the nation, right, in ways that would make it productive. So the land is not about who inhabits it, but rather, because there were indigenous communities that inhabited this land that was this this unknown territory. But it wasn't unknown, indigenous communities very much knew that land.

John Galante

That's really interesting. Is that something you've come to, thinking about your book that engages a lot with Sarmiento and even some of the articles you've written about him are based on his writing. Facundo is his most famous piece of writing, that you're initially looking at him from his perspective, and do you feel like now you're looking more from the bottom-up perspective, having first interrogated the top down? Which also says something about how we approach scholarship, right. And I have to deal with this in teaching as well. Like, you feel like you have to kind of start with the basics with the dates with the politics, lay that all out, and then get to the bottom up, is that how it evolved for you?

Aarti Madan

I definitely came to it in the writing of the book. So Sarmiento was the first piece of the book, I conceptualized that idea in 2006. And the book came out in 2017. So it was a lot of research and a lot of time and a lot of muddied waters to drift through to kind of understand the contradictions at the core of Sarmiento's work, which I identify as being this real tension wherein he wants to craft an authentic national identity that is separate from Europe and separate from North America. And how do you do that, you do that through the genuinely authentic and distinct space of his national territory, right?

You do that by latching on to the so-called language of the barbarian, right, where he is very attached to the gaucho. He's very attached to these ideas that really, for him, emphasize Argentine singularity and Argentine exceptionalism. But by the same token, he wants to eliminate these pieces.

So there's a real tension that I tried to tease out in that Sarmineto piece and in many moments of that writing process. I was guilty, I think, of being a defender of the Sarmentine project to the point where I recall very vividly actually, in my dissertation defense, one of my committee members said, what was happening was really interesting, I as a 20-something Indian woman had really taken on the voice of

my 19th century Argentine and Brazilian white men, and really was taking on their perspective so much so that I was feminizing the land in a way that I understand is now really problematic.

So it has been a process of growth, right from age, you know, 24-25 thinking through these things. And then a lot of reading later here I am thinking about the bottom up. And I think that the the process did happen as the book unfolded. The end of the book, the conclusion, I really tried to grapple with the ways in which the geocritical approach can meld with the ecocritical approach. Because what is the challenge right now? Globally, worldwide as we are in this ecological tailspin, right? How are we going to get out of it? What sorts of knowledges might we value that might help us? And I think for me, the the readers that I'm engaging with, the theorists that I'm thinking with, I can't help but think we have to go to something that's pre-western, we have to go to something that's pre modern. So you're right, that has been a process of arriving there.

John Galante

Yeah, you can almost see it in some of the people that you've focused on like Zeballos is it a step forward? In a way, right? This is Estanislao Zeballos, who was another prominent thinker, I think you call him a *letrado*, right? He's like a statesman, lawyer, geographer, cosmopolitan thinker. It does seem like these figures, these cosmopolitan figures, these intellectuals, these *letrados*, you're drawn to them in a way, because they are fascinating individuals, aren't they? Do you think there's a certain approach they had, or a certain literary style or writing style they had? Are they just really cool people?

Aarti Madan

It's an odd interest, I must admit, sometimes I step back myself, especially with Zeballos, because he is such a curious character. I'm interested in his failures, I really understand him as a failed writer as a failed politician. And I think there's something to be learned from his failure and his commitment to a failed project. Like how does one keep going and going and going, despite so many negative reviews. He still did a lot for Argentina. He still has crafted this, this entire way of existing, so many journals, so much writing, I mean, really prolific writer, right?

And I think that that interrogating the contradictions at the core of his work, and at the core of Sarmiento, to me is very interesting. I think it's all too easy to latch on to the formulaic argument, where you say someone is x, and then you set out to prove it. It's so much more complicated when you can say someone is x and y, and that somewhere in that tension, somewhere in that contradiction, you might tease out something really interesting and nuanced.

And Zeballos gives me that opportunity. Because despite all those failures, despite his absolute annihilation of Argentine nature through the *conquista del desierto*, this incredible war where he not only orchestrated the decimation of these populations, but it was a war on nature. By the same token, he's very much committed to preserving the land and is instrumental to national park creation in Argentina, he's instrumental to creating the *Día del Arbol*, the day of the tree, and I find that in those contradictions, there's something fascinating happening. That speaks to something larger in terms of Argentine identity, where it's you can't just, it's not clear cut. And I think that those muddy waters are really interesting.

Joe Aguilar

And those contradictions, are those things that initially drew you to these figures, trying to unpack the mysteries that you saw between those, you know, seeming paradoxes? Or was that something that you uncovered as you started to read more and more about them?

Aarti Madan

I think that that the tensions that I immediately identified upon reading Sarmiento's *Facundo* in its entirety, and then thinking to myself, wait, how is this the architect of state sanctioned genocide when this person seems clearly drawn to and intrigued by the land's autochthonous inhabitants? How do you make sense of these really diverging interests and perspectives? And I think those contradictions, I wanted to make sense of them. And I think that the literary register is ultimately what allowed me to make sense of these contradictions.

Because this, okay, let's think about Zeballos. Zeballos hates the indigenous communities, yet he writes a trifecta of novels dedicated to ensuring their eternal existence in the space of the book. Right? And he's not doing it because it's, it's something that the market wants, right. Why, why, why is he doing this? I want to understand sort of the psychology behind it as well. I think that in terms of Zeballos in particular, I mean, this is a figure who was well known for having a collection of Indian skulls. Right? There's something really morbid about this, this two-pronged desire to want to exterminate, but at the same time preserve. And I always thought, I want to, I want to understand that.

John Galante

Yeah, when we certainly have to situate them in their time, right? These are elites, right, that you're looking at, but they're elites from the periphery. And maybe some of the contradiction is there, that they are subordinated in a sense to global systems. Nevertheless, in their own environments, if we want to go with that term, or geographies, they are nation builders, and even imperialists. I wonder if that helps explain some of the contradiction or some of the messiness, the x and the y, as you say, that makes it so intriguing.

Aarti Madan

Especially with figures like Euclides da Cunha who, you know, a Brazilian engineer, writer, journalist, who forms part of my first book lines of geography in Latin America, and he set out, his magnum opus, is called *O Sertões*, translated into English as *Rebellion in the Backlands*, he and Sarmiento have been put into conversation with one another quite a bit.

But I think one of the things that makes his work so interesting, is, whereas Sarmiento looks to European geographers and naturalists as a way of authenticating his own knowledge, he is an elite in his own space, but he needs to demonstrate that he's in conversation with the true elite. Right? And so he does that he cites them, he quotes them. Euclides da Cunha does something very interesting, which is to say, hey, I'm going to correct all those European and North American naturalist and what they've written about Brazil is actually inaccurate.

The question of accuracy and exactitude comes up so much in all of these writers that are thinking about geography, because what their goal is to do is to create their own understanding of what it means

to be accurate, right? And it's an understanding that is not informed by Europe. In the case of Euclides da Cunha, he's actually actively trying to rewrite and rectify the works of, say, Alexander von Humboldt, or Henry Thomas Buckle. So there's a constant dialogue where Europe and North America are a source of authorization, but at the same time, in the case of da Cunha, his goal is to rectify it, right?, rectify these previous thinkers, and, and the ways in which they've inaccurately represented the space of Brazilian nature.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++

RICARDO GUIRALDES; THE GAUCHO IN LITERATURE

John Galante

It's actually, you know, a nice transition in a sense to Guiraldes, who I'd really love to talk a good amount about. Ricardo Guiraldes, a really fascinating figure that is moved to the center of your work, I would say at least, the more literary criticism historical side of your work. Can you tell us a little bit about him maybe.

Aarti Madan

So Ricardo Guiraldes is best known as the author of the seminal novel, *Don Segundo Sombra*, required reading for many Argentine students, required reading for any PhD in Latin American literature. And it's this real classic gaucho novel, western novel. And it's definitely the novel that he's most famous for.

He also experienced a significant amount of literary failures, despite having been really committed to his literary work for the vast majority of his career. He's also part of the Argentinian elite, the son of a mayor, really no great need to work and he is a cosmopolite who easily lived between Argentina, between his residents in Buenos Aires, between the family estancia in the outskirts, and also between France, between Paris, right?, so he's fluent and in French. And this is an individual who had a lot of resources to be able to continue that failed career for a number of years before, in his older years, right as he kind of hits his peak between 1924 and 1925, he becomes involved with a group of younger Argentinian writers like Borges, for example, who really appreciate the work that he's doing.

So we see this real network of Argentinian writers and thinkers who create these avant garde magazines, like Martin Fierro, Proa. And Guiraldes and his wife who is also really central to my research, Adelina del Carril, they are financially supporting a lot of this literary establishment that's creating really, really incredibly fascinating work in this 1924 to about 1926 period. *Don Segundo Sombra* comes out around the same time as his other novel, *Jamaica*, they're both published within months of one another, and *Jamaica* is not very well received, whereas *Don Seguna Sombra* is an immediate transatlantic hit. It is a western that's based on this figure of a gaucho. *Don Segundo Sombra*. And this orphaned young boy who looks to Don Segundo as a father figure, and we see this real coming of age novel, wherein we get to understand this, this gaucho spirit.

The novel is written in this very beautiful language that really relies on Guiraldes' personal knowledge of gaucho life and language from his own experience at the family *estancia* in San Areco where he got to sit down in the kitchen, and I say down purposefully, right, because the kitchen is in the down floor where you have the workers and Guiraldes really absorbed a lot of that knowledge, and channeled that

into this masterpiece. And for a number of years, it was very well received, but then by the 40s, it began to be seen as this elite voice, ventriloquizing and appropriating and taking advantage of the subaltern voices.

Again, I think there's so much to be teased out there because his source of inspiration for this figure of Don Segundo has been debated since the novel's publication. Was it based on Don Segundo Ramírez, who was a gaucho on the Guiraldes family property, that was one source of inspiration. Other writers say, Borges for example, says it's a myth. We don't need to really interrogate this at all. We have a series of writers who say, you know, it's the sociologists who wants to keep exploring this myth and we don't need to waste our time on figuring out who this person is. Maybe it's a compilation of a lot of different people.

And then, lo and behold, you have many years down the road, the part of the story that most intrigues me is Adelina del Carril, Ricardo Guiraldes' wife, she adopted an Indian son while she was living in India for about 12-15 years following with Guiraldes' death. And this son, his name is Ramachandra Gowda, he becomes the sole heir to the Guiraldes estate after Adelina's passing. And he begins to kind of parse around the story that Guiraldes was actually inspired by a Hindu swami during his travels through India, in the early 1900s.

And I became really interested in that little tidbit. And that's what I wanted to explore and tease out and understand the ways in which Guiraldes relationship with India, and I'm understanding India sort of writ large, India as a space but also as a spiritual practice, how Guiraldes' engagement with yoga in particular Raja Yoga, and how his literary and spiritual diet really began to be informed by India. And what that means in terms of this national Argentinian novel, being so incredibly informed by India. What kind of meaning might we tease out of a rejection of Western modernity, out of the failure of the West in the in the post war era? I became really interested in Guiraldes as this cosmopolitan elite and this man of the world and have spent the last, I would say, year and a half really exploring this interwoven tale of Ricardo Guiraldes, his wife, Adelina del Carril, her adopted son, Ramachandra Gowda.

And then there's this extra piece that kind of ties it all together, which is wonderful Argentinian documentarian named Andres di Tella, who made a film in 2007 called *Fotografias* in which he grappled with his own fraught identity as the son of an Indian woman and an Argentinian intellectual named Torcuato di Tella. And this film I found to be just riveting captivating, as he is going through this material archive of photographs that belonged to his mother, and really trying to understand what it meant for her to be an Indian in Argentina. right?, an Indian of subcontinental descent in Argentina. And he actually interviews Ramachandra Gowda in the documentary and their conversations are actually what led me to this project.

It's to me this really fascinating tale of understanding the ways in which our identity is formed and the ways in which it's always fraught. And there's feeling, there's great feeling behind it. And each of us is processing those feelings in distinct ways and creating something out of that, whether it's the novel or the documentary, or just the vast amounts of poetry that Adelina del Carril writes and is never recognized for. But it's also trying to grapple with her own identity, and what, what any of these figures might do in these moments of real tension in the world. I think all of them are, especially Adelina del

Carril and Ricardo Güiraldes, they're really trying to process the devastation of World War One in their writings. And so they like many of their compatriots and people of their time with means really did look away from the West, and they look to the East for, for a greater understanding of how to sort through some of those, those horrors.

I think fast forwarding to the 20th century, 21st century with Ramachandra Gowda and Andres di Tella gives us insight into how notions of whiteness and Argentine national identity are actually quite complex once you bring in their grappling with race and their brownness in the space of Argentina.

Joe Aguilar

This sort of adjacent question that I've just been wondering about, there's been some discussion about the figure of the gaucho. And I'm curious what it is about that figure that invokes this kind of, or seems to lead to literature for people and how that idea of what the gaucho is has changed.

Aarti Madan

So the gaucho is an Argentinian cowboy who rides the lands and lives off of the land with little more than their horse, maybe a few horses if they're lucky. And they are herding cows, right, traversing large swaths of swatches of land. It's kind of this free spirit, this free spirit who has a real connection with the land. So Sarmiento does a really great job of describing the different types of gauchos. So there's the gaucho that's the tracker in particular that he's really intrigued by and respects a lot. There's the gaucho, the *paqueano*, who reads the land.

So it's a different understanding of literacy as well. What does it mean to read, reading Western writing and script versus actually reading and intimately knowing the land. So I think the ways in which both Sarmiento and Güiraldes negotiate this figure, negotiate with this figure and represent this figure of the gaucho is, in part, to elevate a different way of knowing a different sort of knowledge, a knowledge that is bodily, that is earthly, and that is so distinct from classic understandings of knowledge from Europe or from North America.

And how does that connect to literature, you ask? I think that the literature comes from the gaucho songs, the gauchos' poetry, right? So Güiraldes had real intimate knowledge of this song of this poetry because he was around it constantly. So there's all these refrains that he intersperses throughout the novel, right? This is a long-lived figure and now actually, if you fast forward to the 21st century, there's a wonderful Argentinian writer named Gabriela Cabezón, who wrote *Las aventuras de China Iron* (The Adventures of China Iron). And she's really taking that Gaucho narrative and inflicting this feminist spin on it. I think that the gaucho is a figure that that is always connected to literature in Argentine thinking. It's the most authentic figure of the Argentine land and it's the figure that really supports Argentine singularity and exceptionalism.

John Galante

You made comments about like the spiritual elements, and even the corporeal, I think, element of the gaucho, you could see how Güiraldes and Adelina could have potentially incorporated that into their understandings of Indian spirituality, in a sense. And even you're thinking is moving much more from a geographic, environmental, spatial thing to a spiritual humanities, or a corporeal humanities. But it's

another layer to your thinking, at the same time that you're moving forward in time and expanding outward from maybe like Pan American or Atlantic conceptions of Argentina to a more global, or even anti-modernist post-colonial ultimately kind of approach to the country and its position.

You mentioned feeling too which I thought was really interesting. The exploration of feeling, especially after World War One.

Aarti Madan

I think that in the aftermath of World War One, you have this whole cadre of thinkers really trying to grapple with death, and what it means to have an attachment to the body. And I think that Guiraldes, I don't think I know, because I've read all of his diaries, right, he's really consumed by his own physical ailments and the degradation of his own body, and trying to reconcile with what it means to just be to surrender to say, it's okay, this body is just a body and if this body needs to go, it's going to be okay, right?

So, as he writes about his yogic practice, and his readings, in particular, of people, like Ramakrishna, and as he's grappling with what it means to be doing these breathing exercises, and to be chanting, he's doing all of that, because he's scared of his own mortality. Right? He's scared of dying, but he's trying not to be scared of dying. And I think what he finds in the gaucho is that same lack of fear that he admires and respects in some of the spiritual readings that he's doing.

He starts with reading theosophy, but he then gradually begins reading a bit more authentic materials that have been translated into English or into French. And he's really getting an understanding of Vedantic and Hindu approximations to life and to death. And he really latches on to this, this, this internalized God where there's no duality, right? God is for him not out in the world, but God is inside of him. And if he can get rid of his ego, he can write. And then he's like channeling this spirituality.

My interpretation of his relationship with his his readings and his relationship with India is as much about thinking through the horrors of World War One as it is about trying to grapple with his own mortality, and the ways that he feels that he's dying. And he knows he's dying, he is, I mean, he dies a year after the publication of *Don Segundo Sombra*, he dies in 1927. So the figure of Don Segundo, one of the things that is so fascinating about Don Segundo is just how much through the course of the novel he meditates on not being scared of death and the body as this vessel that can be thrown off these horses, that can, you know, be gored by a bull. And there's a detachment from it, right?

Now, if you fast forward a little bit to some of Adelina del Carril's writings where she's also trying to think through death, she is convinced that through the senses, you can be attached to somebody who has died, and you can experience them in a way that is metaphysical, in a way that it transcends the human and it transcends touch. She feels Ricardo Guiraldes with her as she gets more and more invested in her yogic practice and in her readings of Hinduism. So while much of her work is also grappling with the horrors of the World War, World War One, she, I think, then has to also grapple with the loss of her partner. This is a really true love story. And I'm drawn to it, I'm really drawn to it, I'm drawn to the ways that they both, kind of, she more modestly, and he more explicitly, insists that none of his writing would have been possible without her.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++

INDIA-ARGENTINA; ADELINA DEL CARRIL AND RAMACHANDRA GOWDA

Joe Aguilar

So I'm curious about the period after Guiraldes' death, and his partner's spending time in an ashram. And I'm wondering what you know about that period, if you would want to talk about that period, just a little bit more?

Aarti Madan

Sure. So that is what I'm currently researching. I just finished reading her, a compilation that her adopted son Ramachandra Gowda created called *Asi pensó Adelina del Carril*. And it's a really curious compilation because he doesn't really follow any chronological order. And he doesn't follow any order of genre. There's drawings, interspersed with poems, interspersed with journalistic pieces, dappled with some letters. And I just, I'm trying to understand what he as an editor was doing with this collection of works by Adelina del Carril.

And I think my reading of it is that he's trying to center her, he's trying to center her in Guiraldes' body of work, and he's trying to center India in her life and thereby in Guiraldes' body of work. That's my understanding of Gowda. Like that's the interpretation I'm imposing upon this edited compilation, because as an editor, what is his MO as he goes through and organizes these pieces that jump from, you know, 1918 to 1937 to 1952, back to 1924, right?

Now, her time in Bangalore following his death is, I think, a really interesting period because she's allegedly gone there in search of his soul. She's gone to India, she has gone to Bangalore in search of her loves soul. And she spends time in this Ashram translating scripture into Spanish and she's mingling with religious figures.

She even met a very young Sai Baba. I don't know if you all know who Sai Baba is. So Sai Baba is this Indian guru that is a very controversial figure. He's got this very big afro that goes about five inches off of his head or so, he was always dressed in orange. And he's very revered and respected by a lot of Indians, a lot of Southeast Asians really look to him as this figure of knowledge. There is Sai centers and Sai societies all across the world. And he was known for being able to materialize things, so you would ask him to materialize an iPhone and he would materialize an iPhone. And so he did some of these, the young Sai Baba, he was in his 20s when Adelina del Carril first met him, and allegedly he materialized these things for her. Right? So this is it's a different sort of, you have, there's a little bit of a suspension of disbelief, right?, Now, Sai Baba is a very controversial figure, in part because he also, there's really horrific allegations of abuse and such that have been levied against him.

Now. The reason I bring him up though, is because he's this very worldwide known figure and Adelina del Carril was engaging with him and everything that she learned during her time in Bangalore, she then brought it all to Argentina. She established an ashram in Bella Vista in the early 1950s. And that's where she and Ramachandra Gowda lived for a number of years, until her passing.

I think that the work she's producing and the translations that she's doing, are really fascinating in no small part because she's convinced in this kind of, we've got the world wars, we've got the Cold War that's like impending, right? She is convinced that the devastation of humankind is just on the cusp of happening. So she is channeling all of her fears, and all of her hopes of salvation of humanity into her writings, right? And a real kind of point of interest for me in her writings is that she's convinced that the main problem is western man. Right?

It's a real sort of proto-feminist stance that she's taking, where she's saying, listen, How have we gotten here? How have we gotten to so much death and destruction is because you have a whole bunch of western men who've taken the precepts of Christianity and have muddied them and have turned what should be love into hate. And now what do we have: death, devastation, and division, division of races division of classes.

She even has an SOS she writes this handwritten SOS that she mails to Gabriela Mistral, the Chilean Nobel laureate, who was also very much invested in Indian thinking, and she writes this letter in 1949, from the ashram in Bangalore, and she asked Gabriela Mistral to disseminate this 18-page, I think it is, SOS to all of her networks, to send it to Mexico to Alfonso Reyes, who was also very much invested in Indian thinking right, to send it to Pablo Neruda, who was Adelina del Carril's brother in law, her sister Delia was married to Pablo Neruda. Pablo Neruda was also very invested.

So you have all these really influential Latin American thinkers, and an elite, who are in some way at least tangentially thinking through how to save humanity by channeling in some sort of non-western thinking, namely, namely Hinduism, namely Vedantic thinking, right? Trying to get past dualities. She so much of a writing is committed to saying okay, our biggest problem is that there has been a notion of supremacy, rather than understanding that man and woman are both essential to all projects, man has been given the superiority. And that is disrupting the laws of nature, she says over and over again. Right?

So I think, that for me, Adelina del Carril and her time in India, and then subsequently her time in Argentina, creating this ashram, it's a really fascinating way to understand how Latin Americans and In particular, a woman was thinking through the power of the word, power of many words, to save humanity from its its impending downfall.

+++++MUSIC INTERLUDE+++++

PANMELA CASTRO AND AFRO-BRAZILIAN STREET ART

Joe Aguilar

So I'd like to transition a little bit into talking about your research into street art and street artists, specifically Panmela Castro, and Shilo Shiv Suleman. And I'm interested in the article that I read from you about Castro, you talk a little bit about how Castro's art and activism shifted over her career along with her own self-identification and appearance, which I think fits in really well with what we were discussing a little bit earlier. And I'm wondering if you could maybe just talk a little bit more about the trajectory of her career, how both her art changed, and her own personal appearance and identification also shifted alongside that.

Aarti Madan

I became really fascinated in Panmela Castro's work around 2015. And that happened, in part, because I had just read an article about her. And I was drawn to her work. And then I realized actually, that I had a picture of one of her murals from when I had been in Brazil in 2009. And so that was just coincidence that I had this this picture.

So as I began kind of exploring her work, I was really intrigued by a shift. It was a visible shift to me, in which her early pieces, she's a classically trained artist, she started her career as a *grafiteira*, by bombing, so tags. And then in 2005, there was the passing of the Maria da Penha law, which is the law that finally made domestic violence illegal in Brazil. That's how long it took, right? Up until then, men can beat their wives with impunity, it was just forgiven. But this Maria da Penha situation was really quite horrific. And finally they passed this law and Panmela realizes, wait a minute, this law isn't reaching the people it needs to reach, right? It needs to be disseminated in more effective ways, more democratic ways. And so she began painting, she began painting city walls to publicize this law and it became the sort of first instance of her political activism, the way the moment in which her street art becomes political street art.

So I knew that story from that article I had read and as I'm exploring her work and her different social media sites, her website, her internet presence, I become increasingly aware of how she started as this almost tan and very blonde long haired artist who was making these portraits, massive portraits of really westernized women with long straight blonde hair. And then there's this shift. And I'm like, am I imagining this? And I'm exploring more. And sure enough, what we're seeing is as her own bodily identity is changing, and she's embracing her dark hair, and she's embracing the waves in her hair, the curls in her hair, she's also beginning to make these massive murals of Afro-Brazilian women.

And then in 2015, she launches this program called Afro-Grafiteiras, and Afro-Grafiteiras is a workshop that's specifically designed to train young, Afro-Brazilian women, not only on how to be street artists, but how to make money from being street artists. So how to channel that that creative talent, that aesthetic talent into entrepreneurship. Little did I know that the next five years would really cement that change that I was perceiving.

So my first presentations on this work, which you know, is, in its original conceptualization, very radically different from the work I was doing in 2015. So, stepping back, I was in the middle of book proofs in 2015. I was done with my Sarmiento and my Zeballos and their genocide, and I was just needing to do something very different, right? So this was kind of almost that, that beautiful melding of a hobby with desire to go to an academic conference that I've been invited to. And I'm like, oh great, I can write, you know, a conference paper about this.

Little did I know that over the next five years, I would become quite obsessed with Panmela's story. And how her shift, both in terms of her self-identification, and her aesthetic practice, really mapped on to a global reckoning with racial justice. So we get to 2020 and we get to the assassination of George Floyd and this really international outcry. And street art globally becomes a way to talk about these issues, whether in its actual material form on physical walls, or in digital spaces.

So I became really interested in, you know, again, space, how are these women, artists of color, reappropriating space that they've been excluded from that they feel unsafe in. But Shilo Shiv Suleman's work with her collective, which is called the fearless collective, was very much on the heels of violence against women against protesting the brutal gang rape of of – she was called Delhi's daughter, yeah? – in India.

And there's this real desire to appropriate space and say, what can we do? We can paint ourselves into this space. We can occupy this space while we create. And we can bring a whole lot of women into this space so that there's a multiplier effect, a ripple effect, right?, where we're teaching, this resistance, this act of resistance intergenerationally, as well.

John Galante

What's it like to study a creative person who is in the present, both about her physical transformation, I think, in her appearance, and about the transformations in her work, and even in her efforts to subvert maybe, or resist. Especially relative to your other work, right, which is primarily historical. You're studying somebody who is evolving, who isn't done, if you will, with their life's work. I could see how it could be more difficult in some ways and easier and others.

Aarti Madan

Yeah, this was actually quite challenging for me because I'm not trained as a social scientist either, right? This project sits at the intersections of a variety of disciplines. And to which I imagined only a minor foray, and then all of a sudden, I was really in the thick of it. And I interviewed her twice, once in 2016 and once in 2019. And I did ask her, I did ask her about the role race plays in her work. And interestingly enough, she insisted that race played a role in her activism, in her NGOs, and less so in her art, right? That was in 2016.

By 2019, her answer had shifted a bit. And I think she too became a bit more aware of some of the subconscious changes that she had been experiencing, that she wasn't actually putting words on to, right? She didn't have intersectionality in her vocabulary in 2016. By 2019, she did. I felt that her political consciousness, her racial consciousness, everything had shifted quite a bit. And I think that's the sort of growth that's natural, she's older, she's more experienced, she's more evolved as an artist as a thinker. She's read more, she's been out there more.

And what's fascinating is by 2021, you know, she's being recruited to do the portraits of the black encyclopedia in Brazil, right?, of these historical figures who are figures who were not photographed, of course, who were not painted, right, maroon leaders, slave leaders. So she is imagining what these images might look like. And I think that, to me, is this moment of like, total transformation, total evolution, which, again, to your point does, she's a work in progress, all of us are, she's still got a long career ahead of ahead of her.

But I think that her, her shift was even imperceptible to her because she's living it. It's her life, right? I think having somebody from the outside step forward and say, this is what I'm seeing. I felt quite uncomfortable with it, honestly, I was not, I didn't feel like I had the authority, either as an Afro-Brazilian

or Afro descendant, neither of which I am, or as a street artist, or even a street art scholar, right. These are areas in which I just had begun to start my exploration in my research.

But between between 2020 and 2022, I really I became convinced that what I was seeing was in fact real. And then I as I read more, and as I explored her corpus more, I began to see that that real sort of understanding that I use of transeffective solidarity of these connections that are Global South connections, and this desire to connect with other women artists of color or women activists, right? Because it's all sort of the same project that's grounded in her understanding of it in black internationalism. It's grounded in, if we cannot emancipate black women, we cannot emancipate anybody. Right? It all boils down to that she really anchored on to that belief.

All of a sudden, as I saw her anchoring onto it, I too felt like I could anchor on to it more. The real moment of reckoning for me was when she posted on Instagram this image in which she is clearly self-identifying as black and the blurb that she includes in it is the story of her father. And how for her whole life, she had not been told the true identity of her father, that she did not know that her father was black, and she really is requesting no more colonization, no more oppression of black bodies in this Instagram post, which I had screenshotted and included in an earlier draft of the essay that I published in ASAP Journal earlier this year, in 2023.

And when it came time to do the proofs, the image permissions for the article itself from Johns Hopkins University Press, so this is very serious, getting the image permissions, that image was no longer on her Instagram. And I became concerned that it was something that she might not want out there. Maybe this was a sign, right, that I needed to tread with caution. So I asked her, because we maintain a healthy texting relationship, and she said it was absolutely no problem, right? So I think something in her shifted where she wants this story out, right? And it is a story that's transformation of self-identification, but also of aesthetic practice.

Joe Aguilar

So this is sort of a larger, more global question, maybe to sum everything up. We've seen as we've been talking a shift in the genre of your scholarship and the scholarly gaze. We've moved from writing, to art, graffiti, visual language. Also subjects, the work of folks who were ordering the land, Sarmiento, Zeballos to folks who are reclaiming or decolonizing space like Castro and Suleman. And then also for men writing in the 18th and 19th century to women creating art right now. It feels like part of a large story. But it's also a shift.

Aarti Madan

And I think it maps on to the earlier question of this is a work in progress. My scholarship is a work in progress. And I think my own political consciousness is a work in progress. So I think that all of these things are mutually informative. The more you read, right, the more you begin to understand that it's not just theory, it's practice. These are lived lives. These are lived lives and lived on lands that have been taken. So I think, for me, again, it does feel personal, I've told you that my family was sort of ripped from their lands. And I've always considered myself this nomad that went from Tennessee to Alabama to Pennsylvania, and now here in Massachusetts. So I'm a work in progress. And all these creators are, are still creating----the ones that I'm studying now. And I hope I keep I can keep studying them.

John Galante

I just want to ask a little more directly, because I was going to precisely hit that as well, Joe. But I want to ask if your work is a reckoning, in some sense with your own position as an Indian American woman, and to what degree that's shaping this transition from the past to the present from white elite men to non-white women from writing to street art, from the salon to the street, from rural to urban. And how that is driven by your own examination of you and the world in which you live in and your position within it.

Aarti Madan

Yeah I think so much of our own identity and our own grappling with our identity is putting words to it, putting the vocabulary to it, right. So I think back to my junior year of college, taking a US Latino Literature and Culture class and understanding hyphenated identities for the first time. Oh, this isn't just my experience, there's a whole population who's experienced this feeling of othering or feeling of subalternization, a feeling of sitting outside of something.

So I think my first forays into scholarship as a graduate student, I felt I had to work within the strictures of academia. And that was literature, right? And doing 19th century literature was actually strategic the market wanted 19th century-ists. I think that now, this is personal. This is personal and the foray into India and Latin America is also very personal and trying to understand race and identity and gender through Latin America. But bringing India into it, that's definitely, these shifts are helping me I think, make sense of, of so much of myself.

John Galante

Alright, well, I want to thank you so much for that and for the work that you're doing. Because your bringing yourself into it enriches it to such a degree that it expands all of these different areas that you're focused on and the connections that you're making are from you, right, and therefore they are making advances and changing the way that people think, coming up with new terminologies and so on and so forth. And really impactful.

So thanks. Thanks for joining us today. I really appreciate it.

Joe Aguilar

Thank you, Aarti.

Aarti Madan

Yeah. Thank you both. This has been good fun.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++

CREDITS

John Galante

You've been listening to *Crossing Fronteras*. I'm your co-host John Galante, a historian of Latin American and an Associate Professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute as well as the creator and executive producer of the podcast series.

Joe Aguilar

And I'm your co-host Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer and an Assistant Professor at WPI, and an executive producer of the podcast series.

John Galante

This show surveys the unique ecosystem of contemporary scholarship and art being generated by scholars and creatives in New England who are working in Latin American and Caribbean Studies.

Joe Aguilar

Our series producer is Jill Ruby. Original music for our series was written, performed, and by Carlos Odria. This podcast was recorded at PRX Podcast Garage in Boston, Massachusetts, with the help of Magdiela Matta. Additional support came from a fellowship provided by the Global Labs at WPI, with special assistance from Steve McCauley, Varun Bhat, and Sam Ollari.

John Galante

The creation of the podcast was also facilitated by WPI's Humanities & Arts Department. Funding was provided by an Undergraduate International Studies and Foreign Language grant from the US Department of Education.

We want to thank all of the people and institutions that helped us in this process.