

## María Elena Martínez

### A Roundtable Memorial

*Jason Ruiz*

From her groundbreaking first book, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico*, to her article in a recent issue of *Radical History Review*, María Elena Martínez was a pioneering radical historian until her death in November 2014.<sup>1</sup> She was particularly proud of her participation in the Tepoztlán Institute for the Transnational History of the Americas, where she was a former codirector and a long-term member of the organizing collective, so we asked veterans of the institute to reflect on her life, her scholarship, and her legacy. In the exchange that follows, these scholars reflect on Martínez as a fiercely devoted radical historian, colleague, and friend.

**Jason Ruiz:** *María Elena is, of course, well known for her work on race, gender, and sexuality in the colonial Spanish world. What can you tell us about how she became such a boldly original voice in her field?*<sup>2</sup>

**Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Matthew Goldmark:** *Genealogical Fictions* pushed colonial Latin American studies to reconceive the history of race by putting the *sistema de castas* in conversation with the ethnoreligious concept of *limpieza de sangre*. As María Elena explained in her book, “Having originated in late medieval Castile, the concept of purity of blood and its underlying assumptions about inheritable characteristics had by the late seventeenth century produced a hierarchical sys-

*Radical History Review*

Issue 123 (October 2015) DOI 10.1215/01636545-3088204

© 2015 by MARHO: The Radical Historians' Organization, Inc.

tem of classification in Spanish America that was ostensibly based on proportion of Spanish, indigenous, and African ancestry, the *sistema de castas* or ‘race/caste system’” (1). Taking advantage of the theoretical insights made possible by critical race theory, María Elena traced the specific history of *limpieza de sangre* as it traveled to colonial New Spain. In this context, María Elena analyzed *limpieza de sangre* as an intersection of discourses on race, caste, lineage, and religious identity. However, rather than remain with European ideologies, María Elena utilized archives from colonial Mexico to explore how indigenous subjects appropriated discourses of *limpieza de sangre* to legitimate their own identities within colonial order. She also connected this discourse with its later appropriations by Creole patriotic writers, reintroducing indigeneity to the core of colonial and postcolonial Latin American studies. By working across historical periods and challenging the rigid distinctions between metropolitan core and colonial periphery, *Genealogical Fictions* illustrated the importance of early modern historical archives to the broader Latin American studies community.

On the topic of archives, María Elena’s recent turn to imagination as a trans-historical hermeneutic allowed her to bridge diverse historical periods, all while attending to texts’ divergent production histories and ethical ramifications. Such methodological innovation appears in her recently published *Radical History Review* article, where María Elena shows that queer historical work is not simply a question of source material but is also a methodological interrogation of the historian’s craft. María Elena demonstrated how historians create ties to historical actors—past and how such connections require reflection and scrutiny.

**JR:** *It would be a mistake to reduce her work to just a few keywords, but how might you briefly describe María Elena’s key contributions as a radical historian?*

**YM-SM and MG:** María Elena is a radical historian at least in two major ways. First, she takes big, complex historical questions and tackles them with elegance, sophistication, and grace. For example, in *Genealogical Fictions* she carefully explains, contextualizes, and documents the relationship between ethnoracial discourses, gender, and sexuality, grounding solidly her work in a very concrete and practical application of intersectionality. María Elena always took the time and space to elaborate the nuanced and difficult arguments needed to explain notions that are historically distant from us. The pedagogical implications of this particular contribution are truly important in our conceptualization of her work as radical. One example that we have discussed often is how in *Genealogical Fictions* María Elena communicates to a contemporary reader what *limpieza de sangre* meant and how it was conceived and experienced differentially by colonial subjects in Mexico.

María Elena’s methodological innovation also marked her identity as a radical historian. She showed that archival research demanded imagination and

embodiment—from the appearance of *fictions* in the title of her book, to her consistent concern with the ways in which we interrogate historical archives with presentist theoretical tools, to her study of performance. These overarching concerns highlight María Elena’s radical praxis in the semantic, political, and etymological dimensions of the term *archive*. Though she remained firmly rooted in the disciplinary foundations of history and Latin American studies, she consistently interrogated these disciplines’ grounding assumptions.

**Pamela Voekel:** What makes María Elena’s a unique and irreplaceable voice for radical history is that she did not just exhort us to expose historical violence or caution us against reproducing its forms in the act of illuminating it, or even just exemplify these practices in her written work. Beyond all these, she actually brought into being the liberatory alternative she urged upon us. María Elena wrote radical, path-marking, and multiply award-winning work that placed her in a class by herself in this field. But she was lonesome at the top of the Tepozteco and reached down to pull us all up with her. Delivered with a wry irreverence, this excessive baroque scholarly generosity marked her as a radical historian for the broadest imagined community of colleagues.

The transformative potential of her call to tap “the experiential knowledge lodged in our bodies and minds” was on full display at the “Race and Sex in the Eighteenth-Century Spanish Atlantic World” symposium she convened in the spring of 2013 [at the University of Southern California (USC)].<sup>3</sup> At that event—in a class by itself, in my own life in academe—her utterly uncontainable force of mind set us the task not of passively bearing witness to her erudition and delightfully excessive scholarly perversity but rather of engaging in a collective ritual of transubstantiation. Under the expert guidance of María Elena and world-renowned performance artist Jesusa Rodríguez, this academic symposium became a co-liberation by and of the same-sex desiring Juana la Larga—from the taxonomies of her nineteenth-century ecclesiastical and scientific inquisitors, from our own twenty-first-century corollaries. These two dazzling minds showed that, truly, “we can only begin to imagine the memories and histories that those bodies can contain, unleash, and perform.”<sup>4</sup> The scholar contributed the unheralded reproductive labor that enabled the performer’s embodied art: a wicked satirical subversion of a colonial medical examiner and a lyrical invocation of the “wayward” poet-nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. In between, she raised money for the undocumented student-activists of Freedom University Georgia so that future scholars could learn to use the masters’ tools to dismantle the masters’ houses. Throughout, she illuminated an epistemological path for all of us to follow in our work while simultaneously encouraging us to loosely employ Adrienne Rich’s critique of the Enlightenment and to embrace the treasures found in the darkness. In short, over two days she accomplished more toward “uniting the archive and the repertoire, history and performance, queer theory and politics” than

most can accomplish in a lifetime of labor—and in her understated way, she lit up the room doing it, so that each of us present carried away a spark from that creative, ethical brilliance to warm us.<sup>5</sup> We didn't know how soon we would need it.

**JR:** *On a personal level, she was also known for her fierceness in defending her ideas and getting others to articulate their arguments better. Many of us benefited from this fierceness. Describe a time that you saw this in action.*

**Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández:** Upon first reading “The Black Blood of New Spain,” I was awestruck by the fine balance between storytelling about African populations in colonial Mexico and the discourse that encircled their demise as one of sexuality and national formation.<sup>6</sup>

Yet when I first met María Elena Martínez in person, I was afraid of her. Her comments at the Tepoztlán Institute were so incisive, her demeanor so serious, and her fierceness so intense, I didn't know what to do. It was only after sitting with her at lunch one day after a session that I saw her humor at work. The consummate professional, María Elena modeled an old-school historical-intellectual intensity with a love of learning theory. This combination of intellectual voracity and the love of learning made her an ideal transitional leader for the Tepoztlán Institute in its early stages. She and her fellow *duranguense* Laura Gutiérrez ushered in a new era of collaborative leadership that our collective so vitally needed. As the institute grew, so did María Elena's performances of irony through her political cabaret roles as a *patrona de hacienda*, among others.<sup>7</sup>

But one of my last long conversations with María Elena was in a cab on the way to ColMex [El Colegio de México] for a conference in 2013. She was on sabbatical, learning Nahuatl in Mexico City. She said, “It is important for me to learn Nahuatl to be a better historian of the archive.” I remember the smallish smile on her face as she explained the latest work. She was in her element, developing a new kind of mastery that was pleasurable and fun as much as it was a serious endeavor. María Elena will always be one of the best historians of the colonial Mexican archive. We should honor that legacy by aspiring to be the fierce, detail-oriented archival scholar that she was.

**Karen B. Graubart:** María Elena is probably one of the two or three scholars whose work is always in my head when I write. I remember reading her dissertation after she finished at Chicago and thinking, how can any of us tackle this question again after this incredibly thorough and relentless work?<sup>8</sup> It's almost impossible to think of anyone addressing the question of race in the colonial world without entering into her work and her definitions of the terrain. I rethought my own second book project after *Genealogical Fictions* came out because the question I had originally wanted to ask was no longer relevant. When we first met at Tepoztlán it was stunning because she really was the person who wrote that dissertation: she was like a

quiet storm, she could cut through an argument with a few words and make you rethink your position from the ground up. We had so many awkward conversations! I wanted to listen to her and think when she talked, which made for dreadful stop-and-go conversations, full of silences, and then I would replay those talks in my head later. We disagreed about some things, and I never left a conversation with her, or a reading of her work, without changing my mind or sharpening my argument. For me, that is the greatest loss: a supple and strong mind against which to parry, in the gentlest and yet most steely way.

**David Sartorius:** When we were in Tepoztlán, María Elena hiked most days to the top of the Tepozteco with the same tenacity and sense of purpose that she brought to her work in the archives. We started talking on a hike once about how our time at Tepoztlán had shaped us, and she said without a pause, “It has made me a braver scholar.” This is a gathering that requires participants to leave their intellectual comfort zones: historians of the colonial period comment on papers about contemporary performance art and vice versa, and we all confront the limits and possibilities of our various disciplinary orientations. Rather than encountering considered (and a few knee-jerk) critiques from a defensive position, María Elena saw these different perspectives as sources of inspiration. They allowed her to engage in disciplinary drag, to try out new approaches in a supportive environment, and to return to her own scholarship with the intellectual daring that’s characteristic of her collaboration with Jesusa Rodríguez, her forays into visual studies, and her artistic choice in one Tepoztlán cabaret to cast several unwitting participants as gringos in an irreverent restaging of eighteenth-century *casta* paintings [a genre depicting the various mixed offspring of Spanish, African, and native inhabitants of the Americas].

**Alexandra Puerto:** When María Elena insisted in true *patrona* style that I sit across from her and Jesusa Rodríguez at the dinner that concluded the 2013 USC symposium “Race and Sex in the Eighteenth-Century Spanish Atlantic World,” not surprisingly, our conversation turned to bodies. Uncategorizable bodies, to be more precise. We had shared two academically rigorous days with a stellar group of scholars gathered by María Elena and Marta Vicente. As usual, María Elena kept us on task with exacting provocations while asserting her characteristic intellectual leadership, integrity, and intensity. She could raise the temperature in any seminar, workshop, or panel. But her formidable academic persona and remarkable scholarship do nothing to set the record straight about María Elena as a person of irrepressible humor and subversive wit. For this reason, as much as I valued her presence in academic settings, I most enjoyed that seat next to her at dinner tables, on road trips to San Francisco, and on summer flights to Mexico City, during mescal tastings in Los Angeles, and late-night cabaret rehearsals in Tepoztlán when she truly unleashed her beautiful mind. Witnessing María Elena’s intimate dinner conversation with Jesusa, though, was an unforgettable experience. As we extended the symposium’s

dialogue we focused on cultural histories of anatomy, methodological and narrative experimentation, and, of course, the plight of Juana la Larga. I reveled in the nonce taxonomies, turns of phrase, and plot twists suggested in María Elena's and Jesusa's bilingual reimagining of Juana's medical encounters. In real time I watched an inventiveness that created a dinner table scene of genuinely transformative and collaborative pedagogy. María Elena's imagination, discipline, and humor touched the Tepoztlán collective in ways that will fuel our irreverence and learning for years. I will miss María Elena's brain-nudging so much. And I will sorely miss sitting next to *mi patrona*.

**JR:** *How did María Elena become involved with the Tepoztlán Institute? What roles did she play in shaping the institute and other intellectual and professional organizations?*

**YM-SM:** María Elena was and will always be remembered at the Tepoztlán Institute as "*la patrona*." This was a role she assumed with total *entrega* and irony, since she was so dedicated to the questioning of the colonial and patriarchal structures that inform everyday Latin American identities. But what was unique about María Elena is that she assumed this ironic role with a hint of humor and fierceness. She was also *la patrona* as one of the former directors of the *instituto*, but we will let others comment about that.

In Tepoztlán, María Elena and I had the goal and intent to attract Latin American colonialists to participate each summer. This was a goal that we assumed implicitly (there was not an *equipo* in charge of this particular task). But each year, we made sure we invited enough colonialists and that one of us read their papers and attended their sessions. María Elena was a generous intellectual interlocutor, and we had the privilege of reading her reflections about the archive in a preliminary version of her essay "Archives, Bodies, and Imagination." Finally, María Elena also organized a special session about archival research for us in the *instituto* and shared with us her many interrogations and concerns about the different ways in which we interact with historical archives as intellectuals, scholars, imaginative beings, committed political subjects, and embodied individuals.

**JR:** *This is, of course, a space for remembering María Elena's incredible body of work and asking what her legacy will be for Latin American studies, as well as radical approaches to history. How do you think María Elena would want her work to be remembered?*

**DS:** I think María Elena would want her work to be remembered as serious, rigorous, and disciplined. Those might not be the first terms that come to mind for defining what makes scholarship radical—they have no inherent political contents,

and, in fact, seriousness, rigor, and discipline are often ill-defined metrics invoked to dismiss radical scholarship. But for María Elena (and so many others), racism, colonialism, and the inequalities they have generated were not to be taken lightly, and she gave particular care and precision to their study. She valued historical methods because they provided the tools to reveal the long, complicated, and surprising histories of these ideas and practices. It was serious business to her; she knew fuzzy thinking when she saw it and felt that it had no place in the intellectual conversations in which she participated. Her writings force readers to avoid easy transhistorical conclusions about the persistence of race and empire. She was well aware of the political significance of presenting to US-based readers narratives about racial ideology that were not centered on British colonial history—not only in her book but in subsequent work in a global/transnational frame that juxtaposed the concepts of *casta* and caste. She produced creative scholarship, drawing in recent years on queer theory, science studies, and critical scholarship about archives. But it was the archive to which she always returned, to deepen, to complicate, to make the kinds of intellectual connections that come from sustained engagement with primary sources and wide-ranging scholarship.

**PV:** I'm so glad that Nicole mentioned being awestruck by María Elena. It was how I always felt reading her work or talking with her about mine or about her cutting-edge projects to push forward the field, including her codirectorship of the *instituto* with Laura Gutiérrez, which catapulted the gathering to new heights of intellectual rigor and creativity. Her work provoked the absolute best discussions in historical theory, methods classes, and seminars on the colonial Atlantic world because she raised fresh questions and employed innovative approaches gleaned from her unparalleled interdisciplinary readings. At the same time, and particularly in *Genealogical Fictions*, her archival work was both creative—as in her use of the records on *limpieza de sangre*—and relentlessly comprehensive. The array of sources she tapped for the book is simply stunning. She would want her work remembered for its dogged archival investigations and as a model of why and how we should embrace polymorphous intellectual projects.

## Notes

1. María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Martínez, “Archives, Bodies, and Imagination: The Case of Juana Aguilar and Queer Approaches to History, Sexuality, and Politics,” *Radical History Review*, no. 120 (2014): 159–82, doi:10.1215/01636545-2703787.
2. Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 6.
3. Martínez, “Archives, Bodies, and Imagination,” 172.
4. *Ibid.*, 175.
5. *Ibid.*, 178.

6. María Elena Martínez, “The Black Blood of New Spain: *Limpieza de Sangre*, Racial Violence, and Gendered Power in Early Colonial Mexico,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 61, no. 3 (2004): 479–520.
7. *Patrón* is a term of respect for addressing an influential boss. The feminine version, *patrona*, reflects the struggle to conquer power and authority in a traditionally male labor field. In Catholic culture, the term refers to the iconic Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, or a female saint in the broader Spanish-speaking world.
8. María Elena Martínez Lopez, “The Spanish Concept of *Limpieza de Sangre* and the Emergence of the ‘Race/Caste’ System in the Viceroyalty of New Spain” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2002).