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Comments on “**La ‘Maestra de América’ reconsiderada: el antiimperialismo de Gabriela Mistral**” by Silvina Cormick

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Silvina Cormick’s excellent essay on Gabriela Mistral effectively challenges the better-known image of the Chilean Nobel Laureate that defines her primarily, if not exclusively, as a poet and educator. Although she was both, she was, as Cormick makes clear, also a public intellectual who identified herself as a Latin American who opposed U.S. dominance in the region. In this fascinating discussion, Cormick explores why Mistral considered herself an anti-imperialist, how she understood what that meant, how her political views emerged and evolved, and some of the tensions that existed in her political views. She also shows that Mistral was actively involved in key political debates that extended across Latin America.

As Cormick notes, Mistral sought “una América Latina independiente, unida, con progreso económico social y en paz y concordia con Norteamérica.” (p. 2) This quote, I believe, establishes both the strengths and the limitations of Mistral’s anti-imperialism. Is it possible to have economic progress and peace with an imperialist nation? Mistral, according to Cormick, had a profound and deeply-rooted sense of herself as a part of Latin America. She saw herself as a member of the region that both included and transcended national boundaries. As such, she sought to maintain the integrity of Latin America as a geographical, social, and cultural reality and prevent U.S. domination of the region.

Mistral's travels outside of Chile, most especially her experiences in Mexico and her close association with José Vasconcelos, the director of the Secretariat of Public Education, both deepened her anti-imperialist beliefs and changed her views on what it meant to be Latin American. In the 1920s, when Mistral lived in Mexico, the country had just emerged from a decade of fighting. Following the conclusion of the Mexican Revolution, Mexico became a center of intellectual, cultural, artistic effervescence, a place where new and progressive ideas and policies were discussed and, to some extent, implemented. Exiles and intellectuals from across Latin America found a home in post-revolutionary Mexico. Mexico City was a place where a variety of Latin Americans met, discussed their varied realities, and developed a deeper, more meaningful sense of what it meant to be *Américo*. Mistral was part of this bubbling cauldron of excitement and anti-imperialism ideas as the invited guest of José Vasconcelos.

As a result of her extended stay in Mexico, she was there for two years, Mistral developed a new appreciation of Latin America, its cultural richness, and its potential for advancement. She also deepened her understanding of the power and predatory nature of the United States. These lessons strengthened her bonds with Latin America and heightened her apprehensions of the United States. Although Cormick doesn't say so directly, it appears that being in post-revolutionary Mexico contributed to Mistral developing a more positive attitude toward the indigenous population. Prior to coming to Mexico, Mistral had held racist ideas towards the indigenous populations of the *Américas*, but her visit to the "Aztec Nation" facilitated her development of a more positive image of them.

Cormick could have explored Mistral's evolving views towards the indigenous populations of the *Américas* more fully, since they entail the very definition of what Latin American means. Mistral's attitudes towards the indigenous were shaped in Chile, a country that

held the Mapuche and other indigenous populations within its borders in contempt, in servitude, and on *reducciones*. She arrived in México at a time when the leading politicians, artists, and intellectuals, along with her good friend José Vasconcelos, were embracing the indigenous peoples.¹ Instead of isolating them in reservation-like compounds, as happened in Chile, post-revolutionary México dated the founding of the nation to the Aztecs. The new revolutionary state included the indigenous into the very definition and essence of what it meant to be Mexican. Surely these new attitudes and practices shook up Mistral's previously-accepted ideas about the native peoples and what it meant to be Latin American. It would be good to hear more about this.

Cormick correctly points out that there were tensions in Mistral's vision of anti-imperialism. The three areas in which these contradictions emerge most clearly are, I believe, around the possibility of peaceful accommodation with the United States versus armed struggle, the possibility of working out mutually beneficial arrangements between Latin America, and Puerto Rico. When I read Cormick's essay, I was struck by the obvious contradiction between Mistral's emphasis using education and the media to achieve harmonious relations with the United States and, at one point, her call to "hispanistas politicos" to abandon their "escritorio o [] club de estudiantes," and join a "Legión Hispanoamericana de Nicaragua" and fight to defend Sandino against the U.S. marines (p. 12). In this instance, she clearly eschewed nonviolence and called on Latin Americans to take up arms to defend the region from the imperialists. This is a topic that bears further explanation and analysis.

One other point that could be made clearer is Mistral's professed anti-imperialism and her obvious admiration for the United States. Is it possible to separate the financial wealth of the

¹ This is not to say that racism disappeared and racial and ethnic equality prevailed in Mexico. But the public discourse did change, as did the public images of what it meant to be Mexican as the murals of Diego Rivera or the art of Frida Kahlo demonstrate.

United States, which underwrites much of what Mistral considered progressive and admirable, from U. S. Imperialist practices in Latin America and elsewhere? It appears to me that Mistral did not make, or perhaps chose not to make, the connections between U.S. domination of the region and the enormous economic richness the United States has extracted from the hemisphere. Why didn't Mistral draw these connections? Was it not, perhaps, in her self-interest to ignore this aspect of U.S. imperialism and to concentrate, instead, on the educational, intellectual, and journalistic aspects of it? Although there is not always a necessary one to one correlation between a person's self-interest and their political views, in the case of Mistral it would be interesting to determine why her anti-imperialism did not appear to target the United States economically or militarily, where it might have hurt more.

What I would classify as Mistral's ambivalence toward the United States comes out most clearly in her stance toward Puerto Rico. Cormick does an excellent job at presenting how Mistral's two-year visit to Mexico affected her. It would be interesting to learn more how her visit to Puerto Rico impacted her as well. Puerto Rico was a U.S. colony at the time Mistral lectured there. (It remains one today.) As Cormick points out, Mistral's "artículos de prensa y sus conferencias sobre la situación de la isla denuncian abiertamente la dominación norteamericana y la enajenación del suelo en manos extranjeras" (pp. 10-11). Mistral also worked with the Puerto Rican Nationalist movement, as Cormick notes. She used her influence to convince important people in Cuba and Chile to support Puerto Rico and to "difundir su cause" (p. 11).

Since many discussions of Latin America overlook Puerto Rico, it is laudable that Cormick included it in her essay. However, Mistral's relationship to the Nationalist movement and her assessment of U.S. imperialism based on her stay in Puerto Rico demand further

attention. If Mistral could appreciate the expansionist nature of the United States in Mexico, why did she not grasp it better in Puerto Rico, where the United States took over the entire country? Yes, Mistral admired Pedro Albizu Campos, the president of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party. Yes, she decried his imprisonment for decades by the United States. But she also maintained friendly relations with Jaime Benítez, the anti-independence Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras. And, in 1948, when students went on strike at the University of Puerto Rico, she chose to support Benítez, not the students, according to Licia Fiol-Matto. Not only that, she joined the chorus of those pro-Commonwealth voices in Puerto Rico who condemned Albizu Campos as totalitarian and authoritarian.² In a speech she was to have given at the commencement ceremony, which was cancelled due to the strike, she projected Puerto Rico as a “bridge” between the United States and Latin America, a position that not only disregards Puerto Rico’s status as a possession of the United States but also projects the U.S.-Puerto Rico relation as one worthy of emulation.³ Clearly, Mistral’s anti-imperialism had severe limitations, as the example of her stance vis-à-vis Puerto Rico and the United States reveals.

Silvina Cormick has written an important essay that offers new and important insights into Gabriela Mistral. Cormick effectively enriches our understanding of the multi-faceted person that was Gabriela Mistral. By focusing on Mistral’s anti-imperialism, she offers us a picture of a complex person, one who evolved over time and held contradictory views. Mistral opposed U.S. expansion into Latin America but does not seem to have challenged the U.S. presence that already existed. Mistral contested U.S. inroads on an intellectual level even while

² Licia Fiol-Matto, *A Queer Mother for the Nation. The State and Gabriela Mistral*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. On Mistral, Benítez, and the student strike see pp. 176-184. In 1952 Puerto Rico’s official status changed to become a Free Associated State of the United States. This change was primarily cosmetic, since Puerto Ricans neither vote in any federal elections nor have power over many of the decisions that affect their political status.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

she admired much about the United States. One of her goals was to achieve a peaceful co-existence between the two regions, while the other was to defend Latin America from further U.S. encroachments. I wonder if she realized the fundamental incompatibility between the two goals? Silvana Cormick's thoughtful essay made very clear to me how critical this basic contradiction was in Mistral's anti-imperialism even as it encourages scholars to dig deeper to learn more about these issues.