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## A Life in Subtitles (text and video)

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## HONORS CONVOCATION APRIL, 10 2019

“A Life in Subtitles”

Prof. Carmela Ferradáns

Illinois Wesleyan University

### THANK YOU AND CONGRATULATIONS

Thank you, President Jensen, for those kind words. Let me begin by congratulating all the students and faculty being recognized today, and thanking the Kemp Foundation for their continuous support of teaching and learning at Illinois Wesleyan University. A special congratulations today goes to Maddie Gibson and Monica Muñoz who are the Hispanic Studies outstanding seniors this year, not a surprise anymore since you are on the program. We all know here that teaching is a process that happens over time and that involves a wide range of learning environments. We also know that teaching doesn't happen without learning, without interacting and engaging the people around us: students, faculty and staff that not only support what we do everyday, but also, and most importantly, they are our fellow learners along the way, and they shape what we do and how we do it in many different ways.

First, I would like to thank all my students, especially Yesenia Martínez-Calderón who once told me I was WOKE and who put together some of the movies you are going to see today. Second, thanks to Professor Joanne Diaz and the first cohort of Humanities Fellows .. Interacting with you all during the spring break immersion in Chicago made me rethink what a college professor is and does as you were explaining to me the cultural phenomenon of the MEME while we were eating empanadas in a Latin joint somewhere in the city.

Of course to my kids, Alejo and Emma, who are my inspiration and who manage to keep me whole and real no matter what. And last, but not least, to Professor Carolyn Nadeau, my friend and colleague for so many years, my editor in life, the one person who keeps feeding my body and soul with delicious food, the one person without whom I could not do what I do every day. Gracias Carolina.

SLIDE ONE (my desk)

I debated a lot about the title of this address, and the content of the address itself. “A life in subtitles” “Living in the margins” “On mermaids and the sea” or perhaps just “Empanada for lunch”. The original idea was to give the address entirely in Spanish with the subtitles in English running behind me—I was just afraid that technical difficulties would have ruined this very formal occasion. The title “*Empanada* for lunch” is always tempting, as it speaks to my cultural identity, and fully explains my kids’ repeated statement when growing up, MOM YOU ARE SO FOREIGN. Apparently I was the only parent who would pack what I consider a proper MEAL for lunch, with silverware, napkins, and a glass container with paella leftovers, caldo gallego, or a piece of empanada. Later I learned, painfully, that sometimes they would exchange my proper lunch for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

SLIDE baby profe

The inner poet in me obviously prefers “On mermaids and the sea” because of the endless possibilities both signifiers would provide for playing with the fluidity of my cultural identity in an extended amphibian metaphor. I could have gone with either “Living in the margins,” “Border crossings” or “Arraianos—the border people”. I think “A Life in Subtitles” is well suited for this Honors Convocation. It is a good description of who I am as a teacher and scholar, and also of my own

work as a poet and translator. It also describes who I am as a person, my cultural identity, ever fluid and permanently displaced as a border person, an *arraiana*, who grew up in a repressed multicultural and multilingual minority during the transition from the Franco regime to democratic Spain. You see, I was born and raised in Galicia, in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, in the periphery with respect to the centralized political power of Madrid, or as I like to call it myself, in the fringes of Spanish culture and society.

In short: I am going to share with you today how being a speaker of a minority language has shaped what I do as a teacher and scholar of contemporary Spanish cultural studies. So, “A life in subtitles” it is, though I will go back and forth to the empanadas, the mermaids, and, of course, the sea.

SLIDE Galicia by Lugris

Galician writer Manuel Rivas describes the people of Galicia as “amphibian beings” of course because the Galician story is so deeply rooted in a culture *from* and *about* the sea. Rivas argues that the amphibian condition of Galicians has a lot to do with the adaptability that allows *galegos* of all social and economic backgrounds to emigrate and prosper in foreign environments while keeping their Galician identity intact. It is also this amphibian characteristic that provides the right environment to exist in a multicultural and multilingual society, to be comfortable navigating between the traditional rural culture of bagpipes, muiñeira music, and romerías and the rapid change and progress of the urban landscape that defines contemporary Galicia.

Galician sense of time fits nicely into this marine metaphor: we went from the Middle Ages to the digital era of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the blink of an eye, without ever going through the industrial revolution, that radical social change in the 19<sup>th</sup>

century that consolidated capitalism and imperialism in the Western world. As economist Manuel Beiras nicely puts it, Galician society in the 1950s and 1960s was still proto-capitalist with a small working class that still needed a rural-based, semi feudal economy to survive.

#### SLIDE VIGO BAY

This *amphibian* working class, using Rivas' metaphor, was concentrated in the city of Vigo where I was born and raised about 30 minutes from the Portuguese border. Vigo was the very place that produced the most subversive counterculture of the 1970s and 1980s introducing Galicia, and Spain, to the *Postmodern Condition*, as I later found out studying at the University of California, Irvine. The young writers, musicians, and artists that I grew up with were absorbing the radical experiments of the European avant garde of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially Dada and Russian Futurism along with the writings of Samuel Beckett and later the atonal music of John Cage. These cultural traditions mixed with the alternative popular culture coming from that amphibian working class gave birth to the punk rock counterculture of the late 1970s, what we call LA MOVIDA, the move, that would define the Spanish transition to democracy after General Franco's death in 1975.

#### SLIDE COLLAGE GALEGO

I usually teach classes on Spanish cultural studies. When I introduce Galician culture to my students, I start with a 1984 Siniestro Total song titled "Miña terra galega" from the album *Menos mal que nos queda Portugal*. The song takes on traditional Galician cultural icons and linguistic expressions taken from all corners of the social spectrum and mixes them up with American popular culture, namely film and rock and roll. The result as we shall see is a fresh definition of Galicia as a postmodern collage where Celtic warriors, the longing and nostalgia of Galician

migrants all over the world and the sublime Romantic landscapes of Rosalía de Castro happily coexist with the Southern Rock and Roll of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama".

## PLAY SINIESTRO TOTAL SONG

### SLIDE: ROSALIA DE CASTRO

Galicia is the land of lyric poetry; our foundational narrative is articulated in the *Cantigas de amigo*, those medieval ballads written in Galaico-Portugués that express a deep feeling of longing for the loved one, for the motherland, that spiritual landscape of places and people; that melancholy and nostalgia that comes from loss and separation, what we call "morriña" in Galician and "saudade" in Portuguese. A kind of nostalgia for a future that we know for sure will never come but nonetheless we so desire. Rosalía de Castro, our Romantic poet extraordinaire, turned to the Galician landscape when defining that *morriña*, the longing for "home"

Adiós, ríos; adiós, fontes;  
 adiós, regatos pequenos;  
 adiós, vista dos meus ollos:  
 non sei cando nos veremos.

Miña terra, miña terra,  
 terra donde me eu criei,  
 hortiña que quero tanto,  
 figueiriñas que prantei,  
 prados, ríos, arboredas,  
 pinares que move o vento,

paxariños piadores,  
casiña do meu contento, [...]

#### SLIDE: URBANO LUGRIS VIGO BAY

I self-identify as a woman of color, my COLOR of course, being my accent. As you all know by now, I do have an accent, and my accent has been my identity mark since I was born, and speaks of all the places where I have lived for an extended period of time: Vigo, my home town in Galicia; Santiago de Compostela where I went to college; London where I worked at The Shakespeare Pub in the City and learned English with Welsh and Scottish people; Barcelona, where I spent a gap year between college and graduate studies; Las Vegas, Nevada where I discovered the naked beauty of Antonio Machado's poetry; Irvine, California where I got my PhD and studied with some of the most brilliant minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and Bloomington-Normal where I live and work as a professor of Spanish at IWU. I often go to Chicago to immerse myself in the city, and get some croquetas at Café Ibérico in North LaSalle Street. In my trips back and forth, I have learned to appreciate the subtle changes in the Illinois prairie that I like to imagine as a vast sea of soy and corn with an occasional stranded mermaid in the form of a barn... But I am digressing... back to my accent.

#### VIGO BAY

My accent and I have learned how to live with each other and how to enrich each other's lives in many ways. But my accent, my cultural identity, is a little more complex and nuanced: I do have an accent when I speak English, and I do have a strong Galician accent when I speak Castilian-Spanish or a variety of *Portuñol*, that distinctive linguistic mixture of Spanish, Galician and Portuguese typical of border people, *arraianos*, such as myself. But, what is the relationship

between language, location, and cultural identity? How do they intersect? Is there such a thing as cultural identity? And if there is, is it based in language? Is it a unified and territorial being that explains who we are? Or, perhaps we should not talk about “cultural identity” at all, but of “cultural resources” as the French philosopher François Jullien explains in his brilliant book *La identidad cultural no existe* [Cultural Identity Doesn’t Exist].

SLIDE: DERRIDA, LYOTARD, SAID

It was not until I got to the University of California, Irvine that I was able to make sense of all this, and articulate my own cultural identity, or the lack of it, as an *arraiana*, a border person, that amphibian being comfortable living in the cultural and social fringes of Spanish and American societies. Postmodern and postcolonial theory gave me the critical tools to fully understand the social, cultural and political implications of having an “accent” as an identity mark. UCI was in the 1980s one of the most important intellectual hubs of Postmodern thought in the country. While a PhD student, I took classes with renowned thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and of course Edward Said, whose intellectual elegance and public engagement with current affairs continues to be my scholarly and personal compass. Postmodernity, among many other things, was proclaiming the end of all Modern dichotomies (high art/low art; self/other; male/female; colonizer/colonized) and also proclaimed the end of the unified subject and the absolute truth in critical theory. Within this theoretical context, I was especially fascinated at how Jacques Derrida could give a five-week lecture on cultural cannibalism and the politics of friendship simply by deconstructing the one phrase “*aimer, manger l’autre*.” LOVING EATING THE OTHER I became particularly interested in how high art and low art forms, poetry and graffiti for



example, *cannibalized* each other producing new and fluid forms of expression in certain Surrealist work made by European women artists of the 1930s and 1940s and of course, in how it clearly explained the Postmodern multilingual collage I grew up with as we saw with the song, “Miña terra galega”.

SLIDE translation

Translation is also a form of cultural cannibalism of sorts, it is also an organic amphibian being comfortable in between two ecosystems. In *The Life of a Translator*, experienced writer and translator Jonathan Dunne argues that translation “[...] is the essence of human experience.” In a way we are all translators, he says, we eat, digest, and expunge the world around us in a series of words. Language is a symbolic system that shapes the world and in turn is shaped by it. Language is that primary coordinate that positions us in a particular time and place, and at the same time carries in each word the past, present and future of our collective identity, what Derrida calls “traces” in the language, those meaningful silences, voids, that are present and somehow articulate our ever changing collective identity.

Translation theory, like all critical approaches to the study of human experience, is all over the place: from Walter Benjamin who thinks that it is simply impossible to translate the poetic experience from one language to another, and one must simply learn the language in order to fully understand a poem; to Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar, a translator himself, who believes that translating is in fact departing from the original text and creating a new one; to the professional translators I meet at the American Literary Translators Association who believe that going literal is the only way to go, the only way to be true to the original text.

SLIDE

Literally, translating means to carry across meaning from language to another. As a transitive verb, to translate means “to turn into one’s own or another language.” These definitions open a very interesting line of thought for dual-language writers such as myself about language, identity, and the politics of translation itself. What would be “my own” language? Galician, my mother tongue? Castilian-Spanish, the language I study and teach? English, the language I use everyday for business, health, politics? For writing reports, texting, posting in social media? I find it very challenging to translate my own poetry into Spanish and/or English. When I try, I find myself writing an entirely different poem, perhaps because as the author and translator I am not bound to an original text, I don’t have to be literal, I have the liberty of changing the experience of the original text.

#### SLIDE: SIRENO BY LEIRO

I had a short encounter with breast cancer in 2004. A couple of biopsies in my right breast surely took the cancer away but disfigured the breast with a deep scar that looked like a rugged canyon crossing my chest. I went through thirty six doses of radiation that summer, and ten years later, when they said that I was cancer free, I had reconstructive surgery on both breasts. The only way I was able to *eat, digest* and *expunge* the whole experience was by writing poetry in English, not Spanish, not Galician. In the collection *My Right Breast and Other Poems*, I needed distance to digest the ordeal, I went back home to that familiar and secure place, to my postmodern collage of amphibian creatures, of longing and drifting away, of mermaids and the sea.

I am going to read one of the poems in that collection and behind me you will see a movie with images of Vigo Bay beautifully edited by Yesenia Martinez-Calderón.

This is my contribution to the ART SLAM that is going on this week across campus.

I am swimming with the flying fish in the Adriatic Sea.

I look up and the sky is blue. The salty water is warm  
and smells of ancient sailor tales and Ulysses.

I can hardly see the distant shore—a long fine line of sand.

My hair curls around my waist.

I am drifting with the waves.

My curvy silvery tail explodes  
in a myriad of colors with my every move.

I notice my two perfect round perky breasts floating with the surf.

I am a mermaid swimming with the flying fish.

I am reaching Ithaca.

#### CONCLUSION: DENICE FROHMAN SLIDE

In closing, let's go back to my accent for a moment. At the Nuyorican Poets Café on December 30, 2013, the great spoken poet Denice Frohman read the poem titled "Accents". The poem describes her mother's Puerto Rican accent as a "sancocho of English and Spanish pushing up and against one another." More than anything, her mother's accent is a compass always pointing her towards home.

#### SLIDE MARCHO QUE TEÑO QUE MARCHAR AND HOT PEPPERS

My accent gives you a glimpse of who I am and where I have been. It is written on my lips and all over my body. It tells an old and oh so familiar story of power struggle, of living in the margins, of always being on the outside looking in. Of

always needing subtitles that explain, interpret, translate, that put ME in context so the many wonderful people I encounter along the way don't get too uncomfortable trying to figure me out. Vigo, Santiago de Compostela, Barcelona, London, Las Vegas, Irvine, Bloomington/Normal. My accent is the verbal expression of my dis\*placed and dis\*located cultural identity, ever fluid, ever changing, ever mine. It clearly defines an inviting and shared space where Celts, Iberians, Vikings, Romans, Portuguese, Moors and Berbers from North Africa, they all live in a postmodern collage at the beat of Siniestro Total, "Miña Terra Galega". My accent has the shape of water, the fierce beauty of a mermaid. It is for sure an empanada de xoubas con pan de millo, and a glass of Godello wine shared with family and friends. It is an amphibian being, an earthy compass that always points me home. Perhaps I should have titled this talk "On Mermaids and the Sea", but that's another story for another occasion.

BITMOJI SLIDE

GRACIAS POR ESCUCHAR