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In Memoriam

Remembering Estelle Irizarry (1937–2017)



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At Georgetown University, where Estelle Irizarry was my colleague for over thirty years, she is remembered as a tough cookie—but one with a sense of humor. Students of mine who took courses with her used to tell me that she was the most demanding professor they'd ever had. Long reading lists. Difficult writing assignments. Pages and pages of historical background. While our colleagues were beating the drums of postmodernism, Estelle was teaching her students to read critically. While others were lost in the theories of Foucault, Derrida, and Said, she was focusing on text, guiding her students through the complexities of works by Carmen Laforet, Ana María Matute, and Francisco Ayala. Yes, she knew about critical theory, but she believed that the notion that young scholars should spend all their time reading jargon-filled articles instead of twentieth-century masterpieces was nonsense. Even now, seventeen years after her retirement, I occasionally run into her former students—now professionals in their fifties—and they tell me how grateful they are for her guidance, inspiration, encouragement, and toughness.

As editor of *Hispania* from 1993 to 2000, Estelle was no less demanding. She rejected one article after another. “They’re not good enough,” she’d growl. “They don’t meet my standards.” When, in 1999, she asked me to edit a special volume of the journal to be called “The *Comedia* at the Turn of the Century,” she badgered me incessantly until I got it done just the way she wanted. She expected articles to be written clearly (no jargon!), prepared professionally, and completed on time.

As a friend, she was warm and generous. When she invited guest speakers to come to campus, she would often host dinners and invite colleagues. She graciously shared her ideas and her research. However, she had a wicked sense of humor, and she was quick to turn it against pompous professors and know-it-all students. She also had a keen sense of justice. When the department bully publicly humiliated one of our colleagues, Estelle stood up for the victim. The first tenured female professor in our department, she welcomed young professors. She came to my kids’ birthday parties and shared the small triumphs and big worries of childrearing with me. Years later, one of her sons took a course with me.

Estelle Irizarry was no less exacting with herself than with others. She was a tireless researcher and published a new book nearly every year. Her academic interests were highly diverse. In addition to twentieth-century Spanish literature, she taught courses in Hispanic literature in the United States, painting and literature, literary humor, and Galician literature. During her long career, she authored nearly forty books and over 150 articles, for which she was recognized and lauded by many organizations. For example, she received the Cruz de la Orden Civil de Alonso X el Sabio from the Spanish Ministry of Education and was an honorary member of the Hispanic Society of America.

Her productivity did not diminish after her retirement from Georgetown in 2000. In 2009, Estelle published *El ADN de los escritos de Cristóbal Colón*, which became a bestseller. She herself

translated the text into English as *Christopher Columbus: The DNA of his Writings* while the second edition of the original was going to press. Based on a meticulous analysis of Columbus' writings, Estelle came to the conclusion that Columbus was a Catalonian *converso*—a Jew who converted to Catholicism under pressure from the crown—and that he spoke Catalan before he learned Spanish.

Soon after the book was published, Estelle came to Washington to do a presentation and signing at the Organization of American States. She had been living in Puerto Rico, and her Georgetown friends welcomed the opportunity to see her and celebrate her accomplishment. The next day, she and I went out to lunch. Estelle was completely surprised by the book's success, she told me. She was sitting in front of her computer on October 12, right after Columbus Day, when the accolades started pouring in. "I thought my computer had a virus!" she said. That kind of self-effacement was typical of Estelle.

The press agency Europa had sent out publication notices just at the time when European scientists were attempting to use genetic material to determine Columbus' ancestry, and "then, here comes this book with DNA in the title!" she told me. It was the first time anyone had alleged that Columbus was Catalonian based on scientific data and stylistic analysis rather than mere supposition. Estelle had noticed that Columbus' use of commas, for example, was very particular and typical of Catalan-speaking Jewish scribes. Like DNA, these stylistic peculiarities are constant and inalterable, explained Estelle, and by studying them, she was able to form an idea of the origin and culture of the Navigator.

Estelle had written about many subjects—Francisco Ayala, E. F. Granell, Enrique Laguerre—and I wondered if the critical praise *El ADN de los escritos de Colón* was receiving made her view it as her masterpiece. Once again, she responded with humility. "I never thought of it in terms of 'masterpieces,'" she told me. For her, the book was an intellectual project. She was astounded that after five centuries, Columbus' admirers had never noticed the ironic humor he used when complaining to the Catholic Monarchs about their unwillingness to pay him or his Ladino-tinged Spanish.

I asked her about the translation. I know from experience how difficult it is to translate one's own work. "Oh," she told me in her modest way, "I didn't do it alone. I had the help of a dragon." "A dragon?" I asked. She explained that she'd used Dragon Dictation, a computer program that recognizes and transcribes verbal speech. By dictating the translation and then going back and retouching it, she was able to work much faster than if she had typed it out on the computer. Nowadays, many speech recognition programs are available to consumers, but in those days, few people had heard of such a thing. However, Estelle was a leader in the use of technology both for the classroom and for the scholar, and she was abreast of all the new technology.

Estelle Irizarry was one of the first to put computers to the service of literary analysis. Her book *Informática y literatura* was at the time of publication the only book in Spanish on the many uses of technology for literary scholarship. Her computer-assisted comparison between masculine and feminine literary styles—for example those of Octavio Paz and Rosario Castellanos—is still considered groundbreaking. Estelle told me that when she published *Informática*, American professors were still not using technology for literary analysis the way academics were in other countries—for example, Canada.

Although Estelle was reluctant to talk about "masterpieces," she did have her favorites among her own creations. She told me that she always had special place in her heart for *Teoría e invención literaria en Francisco de Ayala* because it was her first book—the one with which she had launched her career. She was also fond of it because it proved that literary theory was practiced in Spain long before it was commonly believed. In addition, she was especially fond of *La broma literaria* because she saw literature as an opportunity for play and experimentation, and she found humor even in books most scholars considered "serious."

However, Estelle believed that her greatest contribution to Hispanism was her work on *Hispania*. She told me the journal gave her infinite satisfactions, although it left her with little

free time. She was the tenth editor of *Hispania* and the first woman. She was especially proud of the journal's place as a leader in publishing technology. *Hispania* used new technology for production and dissemination, and also published articles promoting the use of technology for textual analysis. Estelle said she edited every article as though it were her own no matter what the subject—literature, linguistics, or pedagogy. Editing *Hispania* forced her to grow intellectually, she said, because she had to learn about topics that were unfamiliar to her—Portuguese literature, for example.

Estelle and I often talked about our favorite books and our deep love of *Don Quijote*. However, she had other favorites as well. One was *Martín Fierro*, which she said she read over and over again. She quipped that she became especially fond of this book after she had discovered an error in chronology that José Hernández had included, perhaps deliberately. She was also fond of humorous books, such as *Pantaleón and the visitadoras*, by Mario Vargas Llosa. However, her favorite humorous writing was surely that of Christopher Columbus, who slyly integrated irony into his diaries and letters without most of his readers realizing it. Estelle was focusing on women authors long before it was stylish to do so. Among her favorites were the Mexican Rosario Catellanos and the Cuban Lydia Cabrera. Although at Georgetown, Estelle was often considered conservative or even old-fashioned in her approach to teaching literature, in reality, she was ahead of her time in many areas: technology, theory, and women's writing.

By the time Estelle and I met for lunch to chat and reminisce, she had been retired for many years. I asked her if she missed teaching. Of course she did, she told me. She had always wanted to teach. Like so many of her generation, she studied literature with the goal of becoming a professor. She never saw herself primarily as a researcher or a theorist, but rather as a teacher who could bring great works to future generations of students. She told me she missed not only the classroom and the interaction with students, but the structure of the academic year. She missed the excitement of returning to the classroom every fall and of meeting a new group of eager young people whom she hoped to inspire. She missed the thrill of introducing her favorite authors to young minds.

Estelle was engaged in her work until the end. Early this year, I visited her at the nursing home where she was living. We chatted about Georgetown and new developments in our department. She asked about her former students and about my work. She still cared. We had been close friends for decades, and I was sad to see her in poor health. But Estelle Irizarry hadn't forgotten her calling. She was busy organizing her *oeuvre*, making lists of all her publications. By then, she knew she had little time left. She wanted to leave her mark on Hispanism. She would be happy to know that she succeeded.

Barbara Mujica is a Professor of Spanish Emerita at Georgetown University. She specializes in early modern Spanish literature. She is also a novelist, short story writer, and essayist. Her novels *Frida*, *Sister Teresa*, and *I Am Venus* have all garnered critical praise. Mujica was Faculty Adviser to the Georgetown University Student Veterans Association and Co-director of the GU Veterans Support Team. In 2015, she received the President's Medal from the University for her work on behalf of veterans.