PUBLIC HUMANITIES AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

A RESPONSE TO IGNACIO LÓPEZ-CALVO'S "TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LATIN AMERICAN CRITICISM AND THEORY"

Robert McKee Irwin

I read with interest the lucid evaluation of the tendencies of the past two decades (2005-2025) of scholarship in the field of Latin American literary and cultural studies articulated by Ignacio López-Calvo in this issue of *FORMA*.[1] Following the logic of López-Calvo's "Twenty-First Century Latin American Criticism and Theory," I propose to extend the discussion of newer critical approaches that are likely to continue to gain traction and expand their reach in the coming decades to include those incorporating an attention to community engagement.

I found it especially interesting to note the degree to which López-Calvo's assessment coincides with that of Juan Poblete in his introduction to a 2018 collection of essays describing a series of historical "turns" that were first presented in 2013 in response to a prompt looking to define key tendencies in the same field over the previous 25 years (1988-2013).[2] The coincidence between the two surveys would seem to imply that these changes are better considered over a longer term, but I would argue that Poblete's "turns" and Lopez-Calvo's "approaches" reflect a series of revisions proposed by one generation of influential thinkers, and then implemented by the next, this latter including both Poblete (Ph.D. 1997) and López-Calvo (Ph.D. 1997)—and the author of this article as well (Ph.D. 1999). Our generation largely took on incorporating the thinking underlying what we read in graduate school into a range of pedagogical, research, and publishing projects that now clearly represent the mainstream of our field. In fact, Mónica Szurmuk (Ph.D. 1994) and I laid out much of the same rubric in 2011[3] (extending arguments already set forth by Ana Del Sarto, Abril Trigo, and Alicia Ríos[4]), locating these transformations within the rubric of the incursion of Cultural Studies in this field beginning as early as the 1980s, and with a consolidation having occurred by the early 2000s and materialized in the publication of several influential essay collections, such as those edited by Mabel Moraña; Ana Del Sarto, Abril Trigo, and Alicia Ríos; Catherine Walsh; and Stephen Hart and Richard Young.[5]

The Cultural Studies rubric, which is loosely defined through its creative interdisciplinarity, its political engagement, its attention to social and cultural

theory, and its anti-elitist approaches, was both inspired by the zeitgeist of Cultural Studies' arrival in the U.S. and Latin America, and by a longer history of politically-committed Latin American critical engagement—for example, that of high impact public intellectuals, such as Beatriz Sarlo in Argentina, Carlos Monsiváis in Mexico, and Nelly Richard in Chile.

Most of us who were reading these authors as graduate students or early career faculty were not in a position to gain access to the platforms for public communication that Sarlo, Monsiváis, or Richard engaged (nor, perhaps, did we have the intellectual maturity to thoughtfully and convincingly address the vast range of social, cultural and political issues that those thinkers could effectively appraise). But it was reassuring that, albeit with all kinds of caveats, these thinkers (and many others of their generation, whom we also admired) were weighing the pros and cons of the project of Cultural Studies or affiliated tendencies for the context of Latin America. Even if we were not ready or able to become major public intellectuals, many of us still wished to produce scholarship that somehow mattered, that could have some impact beyond the context of the narrow microfields of academia. We wished to intervene in some meaningful and perhaps direct way in the sociocultural contexts that we studied. Richard, who would later found and direct a graduate program in Cultural Studies in Chile, in considering the importance of intervention to the project of Cultural Studies, turned to the concept of conjuncture in the work of the Jamaica-born Cultural Studies pioneer Stuart Hall, reaffirming that the field's interventions might take place in a broad public sphere, or within academia itself.[6] Other leading figures in Latin American Cultural Studies applied greater stress to the term. Eduardo Restrepo proclaimed: "Intervention is the most important distinctive trait of Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies cannot exist without intervention."[7] And for many scholars of this next generation (Restrepo earned his Ph.D. in 2008), the notion of producing scholarship capable of making some concrete impact was becoming an imperative.

The increasing intersections during these same decades between Latin American Studies (interdisciplinary area studies rooted in distinct disciplines such as History, Literature, and Anthropology) and the growing field of Latinx Studies (an interdisciplinary project that had obtained its own degree programs and departmental infrastructures) in the United States might also be considered in this vein. For example, Chicanx Studies, a field that emerged directly from community activism, sought from its outset (in the 1970s) to achieve tangible sociocultural impacts. A 1978 survey, published when the field was in its infancy, lists over a dozen oral history projects aiming to document experiences of Mexican American communities in the United States.[8] The archives they produced were important for academia, but perhaps more so for the communities themselves.

Latin American Studies' increasing intersections (for example in its approaches to migration or transnational media), or at the very least shared institutional experiences (in Spanish, History, and other departments) with Latinx Studies has pushed scholars to consider why postcolonial, feminist, or Cultural Studies approaches should remain at the level of theory or analysis of cultural objects when Latinx Studies colleagues were engaging (sometimes from positions in our own departments such as Spanish or History) in much more public-facing and locally-impactful projects involving collaborations with civil organizations or more informal nonacademic groups (e.g., community arts projects, oral history and public memory projects, youth empowerment projects, etc.).

Cultural Studies, in its early incursions in the United States, tended to have a strong bias toward a cultural criticism that may have been radical in abandoning elitist orthodoxies of the fields like literary criticism and art history, and in shifting attention to popular culture, audience reception, and marginalized social sectors. It became enamored with social, cultural and political theory, but practitioners of Cultural Studies mostly limited their application to analysis of cultural objects and archival data. However, in its expansion through Latin America, by the early 2000s, Cultural Studies began to look more outward. For example, the innovative doctoral program in Latin American Cultural Studies at Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito, Ecuador, sought "to build new critical communities of thought, interpretation, and intervention" by bringing organic intellectuals from indigenous and Afrolatinamerican communities to campus with the aim to challenge "the dominant geopolitics of knowledge" in the field and across the academy.[9] Meanwhile, the graduate program in Sociocultural Studies at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California was founded (and remains located) in the Institute for Cultural Research-Museum, whose exhibition space invites public interaction with and diffusion of scholarly research.[10]

More explicit was the project launched in 1999 and led by Daniel Mato, then based at Universidad Central de Venezuela, under the auspices of Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (CLACSO)'s Culture and Power working group, which resisted the label of Cultural Studies specifically for its insular academic focus.[11] Mato introduced the less-catchy but descriptive moniker "Studies and Other Latin American Practices in Culture and Power." He argued for the idea of much more deeply community-oriented and collaborative ventures in which scholars dialogued with community partners, as equals, coming up with processes informed by both academic and local knowledge and aimed at addressing problems in ways that would first and foremost be meaningful to communities. The research that emerged from this large and dynamic working group was substantial, resulting in three highly-regarded publications featuring contributions from dozens of scholars from all over

the Americas, including some distinguished senior figures (e.g., Jesús Martín Barbero, Néstor García Canclini), as well as many younger scholars, some of whom would go on to become intellectual leaders of the next generation (e.g., Ana María Ochoa, Alejandro Grimson).

The rise of Memory Studies, which López Calvo describes as "newer" (but in Poblete's volume is described by Michael Lazzara as being rooted in the 1980s, with significant inroads into the academy through the 1990s and 2000s[12]), has no doubt contributed to this impulse to produce academic research in dialogue or collaboration with community partners with the aim of producing public archives, exhibitions, and other outward-reaching research products.

With this mix of energies, the field in general began to quietly expand beyond the trends regarding theoretical debate and cultural analysis outlined by López Calvo to include research projects designed through direct community engagement. A 2022 interrogation on the current deployments of Latin American Cultural Studies[13] concludes with a chapter focused on "bridges between academy and society," in which a common will to "intervene" in society "turns to action, experimentation and agency and in its own dynamic becomes both a way of acting and a way of thinking."[14]

Many in our generation (those of us who obtained our PhDs in the late 90s, give or take a few years) have been timid in getting into Public Humanities. While we were trained to think beyond the academy, we were not oriented in any clear or specific way to carry out scholarship in community contexts, much less in collaboration with nonacademic partners. And even if we were interested in community-engaged scholarship, we may have feared that such activities would be misunderstood or discouraged. Still, our formation as critics emerged from perspectives rooted in feminist, postcolonial, antiracist, subalternist, and queer theory, and that kept many of us thinking about branching out into Public Humanities projects. Meanwhile some universities in recent years began rewarding community-engaged projects in general (not excluding Humanities fields), whether with funding, awards or revised criteria for merit and promotion reviews, and those who had secured tenure began feeling more free to experiment.

By the third decade of the new millennium, it is now clear that Public Humanities projects constitute a major new tendency in Latin American Cultural Studies and affiliated Humanities fields (Literature, History, Philosophy, etc.). When I developed, in collaboration with colleagues from El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, the *Humanizando la Deportación* project in 2016, I was driven by a personal motivation to address an increasingly cruel public discourse on immigration in the United States. I had no models to follow, but did have two decades of scholarly readings that laid the groundwork for the design of the project, which remains active a decade later.[15]

I had some familiarity with Latin American Public Humanities projects. I recall a fascinating project by a then recent Ph.D. in Spanish from UC Berkeley, Soledad Falabella, which endeavored to form community among Mapuche women poets in Chile (publishing the first of two books of their work in 2006).[16] I was also impressed in meeting Ana Patricia Rodríguez, a specialist in Central American immigrant communities in the U.S., who began experimenting with community-based audiovisual projects in the undergraduate classroom at the University of Maryland in the early 2010s.[17] I also admired from a distance the activist work of feminist scholars such as Julia Monárrez Fragoso and Alicia Gaspar de Alba (among many others, some of whose work is published in a volume edited by the latter) in collaboration with community members and groups in Ciudad Juárez in the context of 1990s feminicides.[18] These projects, which I discovered one by one, were creative and inspiring, but initially seemed exceptional, in the sense of being unusual but also marvelous. I'm sure there were many other projects in those days, but their dissemination was often limited. But by the 2010s, community-engaged research was becoming more common, whether under rubrics of oral history, public memory, or participatory audiovisual production. In 2013, Harvard Spanish professor Doris Sommer published her book *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (2013), which laid out an agenda for "bring[ing] civic responsibility back to humanistic education."[19] Like me, many colleagues of my generation and perhaps more from the next generation, have found that those we were training were demanding from us tools and methods to follow through materially on the theory we were teaching them. And now in 2026, it is easy to observe that such projects have become increasingly common across the Americas.

For example, from Mexico, there is a just-published anthology of essays on Public History.[20] The volume documents a wide range of projects, many involving a collaboration between Humanities scholars from the fields of History, Philosophy and Literature and communities from across the nation. These initiatives take myriad forms: public urban history (Barbosa Cruz; Moreno Carranco and Calderón Contreras); "community narratives" (Rufer); a community museum (Omaña Mendoza); and autoethnography transformed into comics (Moreno Carranco and Ponce de León). In a recent survey article, Clayton McCarl and eleven coauthors from across the U.S., Mexico, and Colombia examine digital public humanities projects being carried out across Latin America, all focused on the colonial era or the nineteenth century.[21] These projects include more conventional public memory approaches as well as digital labs inviting student or community participation, not unlike the "citizen labs" explored by Paola Ricuarte Quijano (Mexico) and Virginia Brussa (Argentina) in their "Iberoamerican manifestations."[22] Articles describing individual projects abound as the concept has become mainstream across the Americas. It is

no longer unusual to find Public Humanities work featured prominently on academic CV's or institutional websites, to see it incorporated meaningfully into doctoral dissertation projects, and to encounter it disseminated widely via social media, blogs, community forums and exhibitions, academic conferences and publications, and media interviews. Indeed, considering the politically and socially informed theory and scholarship that has come to dominate Latin American Studies over the past decades, these ever more bold and impactful forays into Public Humanities are increasingly welcome.

NOTES

[1] Ignacio López-Calvo, "Twenty-First Century Latin American Criticism and Theory: From High Culture, Disciplinary, Humanistic and Objective, to Popular Culture, Interdisciplinary and Subjective," *FORMA* 4.1 (2025): 1-26.

[2] Juan Poblete, "Introduction: Twenty-Five Years of Latin American Studies," *New Approaches to Latin American Studies: Culture and Power*. Edited by Juan Poblete (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1-13.

[3] Mónica Szurmuk and Robert McKee Irwin, "Presentación," *Diccionario de estudios culturales latinoamericanos*. Coordinated by Mónica Szurmuk and Robert McKee Irwin (México: Siglo XXI/Instituto Mora, 2011), pp. 9-42.

[4] Ana Del Sarto, Abril Trigo, and Alicia Ríos, Eds. *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

[5] Mabel Moraña, Ed., *Nuevas perspectivas desde/sobre América Latina: el desafío de los estudios culturales* (Pittsburgh: Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, 2002); Catherine Walsh, Ed. *Estudios culturales latinoamericanos: retos desde y sobre la región andina* (Quito: Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar/Abya Yala, 2003); Del Sarto, Trigo, Ríos, *Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*; Stephen Hart and Richard Young, Eds. *Contemporary Latin American Cultural Studies* (London: Arnold, 2003).

[6] Nelly Richard, "Respuestas a un cuestionario: posiciones y situaciones," *En torno a los estudios culturales: localidades, trayectorias y disputas*. Edited by Nelly Richard (Santiago: Editorial ARCIS/CLACSO, 2010), pp. 67-82.

[7] Eduardo Restrepo, "Respuestas a un cuestionario: posiciones y situaciones." *En torno a los estudios culturales: localidades, trayectorias y disputas*. Edited by Nelly Richard (Santiago: Editorial ARCIS/CLACSO, 2010), p. 116. The translation of the cited passage is mine.

[8] Oscar Martínez, "Chicano Oral History: Status and Prospects," *Aztlán: International Journal of Chicano Studies Research* 9 (1978): 119-131.

[9] Catherine Walsh, "Shifting Geopolitics of Critical Knowledge: Decolonial Thought and Cultural Studies 'Others' in the Andes," *Cultural Studies* 21:2-3 (2007): 233.

[10] Luis Ongay Flores y Consejo Técnico de Investigación del Centro de Investigaciones Culturales-Museo. "Propuesta de cambio de dominación del CIC-Museo a IIC Museo," Secretaría General de la Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, 2011: https://sriagral.uabc.mx/Secretaria_General/consejo/201105/07.pdf.

[11] Daniel Mato, Comp., *Cultura, política y sociedad: perspectivas latinoamericanas*

(Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2005).

[12] Michael Lazzara, "The Memory Turn," *New Approaches to Latin American Studies: Culture and Power*. Edited by Juan Poblete (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 15.

[13] Marta Cabrera and Marcos Monsalvo Ricci, Eds., *¿Para qué sirven los estudios culturales?: cultura, política y poder en Latinoamérica* (Buenos Aires: RGC Libros, 2023).

[14] Álvaro Hernández Bello and Gabriel Sarmiento, "Coda: puentes entre academia y sociedad: estrategias para entrar y salir de los estudios culturales," *¿Para qué sirven los estudios culturales?: cultura, política y poder en Latinoamérica*. Edited by Marta Cabrera and Marcos Monsalvo Ricci (Buenos Aires: RGC Libros, 2023), p. 279.

[15] See the *Humanizando la Deportación* site for the digital archive of narratives: https://humanizandoladeportacion.ucdavis.edu/es. See also Robert McKee Irwin and Guillermo Alonso Meneses, Coord., *Humanizando la deportación: Narrativas digitales desde las calles de Tijuana* (Tijuana: Editorial Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2023); Robert McKee Irwin, "The Humanizing Deportation Project: Building an Archive of Migrant Feelings, Migrant Knowledge," *Migrant Feelings, Migrant Knowledge: Building a Community Archive*. Edited by Robert McKee Irwin (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022), pp. 3-32.

[16] Soledad Falabella, Allison Ramay and Graciela Huinao, Eds. *Hilando en la memoria: 7 mujeres mapuche* (Santiago: Cuarto Propio, 2006).

[17] Ana Patricia Rodríguez, "Entre Mundos/Between Worlds: Digital Stories of Salvadoran Transnational Migration," *Letras Hispanas* 11 (2015): 326-335.

[18] Alicia Gaspar de Alba, with Georgina Guzmán, *Making a Killing: Feminicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

[19] Doris Sommer, *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 1.

[20] María Moreno Carranco, Akuavi Adonon Viveros, Mario Barbosa Cruz and Maite Zubiaurre, Eds., *Public History in Mexico: Memories, Displacements, and Intimacies* (New York: Routledge, 2026).

[21] Clayton McCarl, et al., "Colonial and Nineteenth-Century Latin American Studies and Digital Public Humanities." *Digital Studies: Le Champ Numérique* (2023): https://www.digitalstudies.org/article/id/9601/.

[22] "en clave iberoamericana", 33. Paola Ricuarte Quijano and Virginia Brussa, "Laboratorios ciudadanos, laboratorios comunes: repertorios para pensar la universidad y las Humanidades Digitales," *Liinc em Revista* 13.1 (2017): 29-46.