

Review / Reseña

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Planetary Longings*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2022. 337 pp.

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Planetary Longings is Mary Louise Pratt in her prime. A profound historical thinker, global intellectual, and reader rooted in Latin American studies, Pratt invites us in this book to witness the tumultuous and changing history of Latin America—and with it, crucially, the discipline of Latin American cultural studies—over the past forty years. The book can be read as a chronicle extending from the rise of *testimonio* literature (penned by one of its main critics) during the Cold War to the current climate crisis and discussion of the Anthropocene, passing through the Southern Cone novels of the 1990s that give aesthetic form to the claustrophobic reign of neoliberalism in the region. In this book, the complex intersections between literary criticism, cultural studies, postcolonialism, and sociolinguistics are brought within our reach in readable and vigorous prose, in which a sharp sense of humor is combined with a vibrant and optimistic invitation to read, think, and listen to the forces that move the world.

The epigraph of the first edition of her seminal book *Imperial Eyes* perfectly blends humor with an invitation to reflection. She quotes Yogi Berra: “you can observe a lot just by looking,” which serves as a self-portrait of both Mary Louise Pratt and her

intellectual project. This approach that is so characteristic of her writing is the backbone of her new intervention. As readers, in *Planetary Longings* we see Mary Louise Pratt watching a television program in Cuzco about millenarianism, and then building from it an argument about world creation, temporality, and popular culture. At yet another point, we see her listening to an elderly white man celebrating a John Deere tractor in the Andes of the 1990s. She reads in him as a vestige of the old hacienda system dismantled by socialist military leader Juan Velasco Alvarado in 1970s Peru. Seeing, hearing, and reading is Pratt's mode of critical creation of thought, as well as a mechanism through which she opens up possibilities for her readers to better understand the world and, through it, make change possible.

Planetary Longings is, of Pratt's previous interventions, the most personal. Perhaps because of this, it is also the most evocative. The introduction to the book is a personal and intellectual biography that sheds light on the lived experiences of a continental thinker who lived her own version of European colonialism. A Canadian born into a family of women before her country became fully independent from Britain, Pratt was a student with an outstanding talent for languages and a love of travel. She is a linguist by training, a literary scholar who helped build the discipline of cultural studies in the United States and Latin America, and a key voice in the debates on postcolonialism, travel literature, and decoloniality with her indispensable *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (a book that remains relevant in 2022 on its 30th anniversary). Along with other feminist critics and intellectuals of her generation, Pratt challenged the canon, recovering and rethinking nineteenth-century women's writing in Latin America. She was ahead of her time as a planetary thinker of the urgent questions that today concern ecocriticism and the environmental humanities. The entanglements of the Global North's imperial designs and the modernization and the destruction of the planet are issues now seen in places around the globe where asymmetrical forces meet, in what the latest generation of *Imperial Eyes* readers—reprising her influential theoretical term “Contact Zone”—now call the “Interspecies Contact Zone.”

In addition to being an intellectual biography, *Planetary Longings* is, perhaps most importantly, an invitation to think about the future from other points of crisis in the past. In times of both climate change and the communications revolution, the book foregrounds the crisis of imagination we are going through as we face “the certainty that these [environmental] changes in the world will be impossible to anticipate or control and will produce increasingly hostile conditions of existence.” To this end, the

book dwells precisely on what is “impossible to anticipate” in order to make us productively embrace the mourning for a disappearing world, while also opening a space to face the challenge of thinking (with joy) about how we will cope, as a species, with a world that is no longer the world into which we were born.

To meet the immense challenges to the imagination posed by the climate crisis, Pratt presents us in this book with a toolbox for the future as possibility and unimaginable terrain. This toolbox is both literary and conceptual, and it revolves around having a language for what lies ahead. Here is a quick sample of some of the words and concepts she creates and on which she invites us to reflect: futurology (imagination is triggered when futures are unimaginable), forces (such as modernization, but also indigeneity) and force fields (social networks, but also forest fires), and crisis of futurity. With these concepts she points us to futures that lie beyond the horizon, and that are “helpful when you are in a non-analogue state” (119), as we are at present. They are planetary concepts, but deeply localized. The book looks backwards and forwards in time, it evokes and analyzes past moments where the future was summoned and yet impossible to grasp: Túpac Amaru II and Micaela Bastida’s Andean revolution against the Spanish Empire in 1780, or Francisco Miranda’s wild projects of postcolonial Spanish America in 1805. Through eye-opening readings of the historical representations of progress, Pratt dresses down modernity as a “white identity discourse” through which Europe sought global dominance. A life-long proponent of how words inform our framework to think through political and aesthetic problems, Pratt also invites us to revisit the metaphors used by writers about the climate crisis—metaphors with origins in those already mobilized in nuclear Holocaust narratives. This book, like her whole *oeuvre*, is concerned with connections between legacies of imperialism and the present, and Pratt shows how the work of empire acquires new “extroverted workings” in military bases and tourism. We also read about the ways in which the future emerges in the shape of the past. *Planetary Longings* has a gripping chapter—perhaps the most topical, along with the poignant “coda” on COVID and Black Lives Matter—on Trump’s Pinochetization of the U.S., positing Trump as a localized iteration of Chile’s Augusto Pinochet. This chapter can be read as a sequel to North-South relations as seen through the analysis of Icíar Bollaín’s 2010 film *También la lluvia*, which shows the reenactment of the Spanish Conquest in Bolivia at the height of neoliberalism and its privatization of public resources. The chapter is an excellent resource for in-class discussion to accompany Bollaín’s movie, which is frequently

revisited in the classroom as an entry point to discuss the Spanish conquest and its contemporary legacies.

While *Planetary Longings* is a timely intervention on the climate crisis and the challenges it poses both to the imagination and to our overall conceptualization of temporality, the book is also a history of the discipline of literary and cultural studies, extending from the emergence of postcoloniality to today's ecocriticism and reemergence of decoloniality. If travel literature was the archive Pratt revisited and read anew to powerfully generate the conversation on postcolonialism (travel writing has completely changed since Pratt read this corpus), then *Planetary Longings* emphasizes "placefulness," inhabiting what she has called "a love of the world"—that is, the force that moves environmental activism and thought (and also, I might add, her writing). Chapters span from the imperial histories of the island of Vieques all the way to an exciting wave of recent indigenous intellectual production from the Americas—a wave that cut across the COVID pandemic and the airwaves while histories of racial violence in the U.S. continued to develop despite (or because of) the quarantine in the book's coda. Throughout, Pratt situates herself as a reader of a diverse archive that includes the internet, Cuzco pulp magazines, television commercials, early nineteenth-century political manifestos, romantic short stories, and postmodern novels, as well as her own experience as an actress and witness to more than thirty years of Latin Americanist thought in the Americas.

In times of "crisis of futurity," to use Pratt's term, students today are thinking and writing about the future with an intensity that did not exist a generation ago. *Planetary Longings* comes as much needed resource to think of climate change as a global crisis of the imagination, all the while celebrating concepts and thinking through poetic languages as a gateway toward imagining ways to turn away from the script of progress and to chart possible new futures. These new horizons will be brought about, says Pratt, by "[e]ducating imaginations," which "is the central work of scholarship and teaching, especially in the humanities" (126). Mary Louise Pratt, "educator of imaginations," puts forth in this book a new way of thinking about our relationship with the future, a time frame that we had not previously thought of as fragile and daunting, yet full of options. Of all the themes she addresses in this new book, imagination—the main engine of Pratt's thinking and at the same time her central concern as an author and educator—is the main pillar of an intellectual intervention that is truly about imagining new futures. At a time when we are told that the future is devoid of possibilities, *Planetary Longings* invites us to imagine it differently and, in doing so, to reimagine ourselves.