Exploring Transnationals and the Borderlands: An Interview with Mary Petron

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Abstract

Mary Petron has published over twenty articles, six book chapters, and one edited volume, amongst other publications. Her widespread research and publications have led her to present in national and international conferences concerning her interest in the transnationalism phenomenon. Mary Petron was born in Midwestern United States, of Mexican descent. She holds a PhD in Foreign Language Education from the University of Texas.

Resumen

Mary Petron ha publicado más de veinte artículos, seis capítulos de libros, y un volumen editado, entre otras publicaciones. Sus extensas investigaciones y publicaciones la han llevado a presentar en conferencias nacionales e internacionales en cuanto a su interés en el fenómeno transnacional. Mary Petron nació en el medio oeste de Estados Unidos de América, de descendencia mexicana. Ella cuenta con un grado doctoral en Educación de Lenguas Extranjeras por parte de la Universidad de Texas.

Mary Petron was invited to the *IV Seminario Permanente de Lingüística Aplicada for* the MA program in Applied Linguistics in English Language Teaching at the *Universidad de Guanajuato*, Guanajuato, Mexico, in November, 2016. Apart from presenting her current research project to the academic audience at the event, she agreed to share her perspective on several topics of her interest. I interviewed Mary to gain a deeper understanding of her outlook concerning transnationals and related topics. Within the conversation, the themes that arose are: transnationalism, transnationals, translanguaging, and borderlands, amongst other topics. Over a cup of coffee, we had the following conversation, which has been slightly edited for clarity.

When questioned how she would define herself, Mary recalled the following:

> *I'm of Mexican descent. My grandparents were born in Chihuahua, and we went back like once a year to take them. It was like a rancho en medio de la nada [a ranch in the middle of nowhere]… I didn't grow up speaking Spanish; I grew up understanding it. My parents, they had been punished in school for speaking Spanish, so we only learned how to understand it thanks to my grandparents. When I first went to college, I wanted to be able to speak it. It was almost like reverse. I felt something from Mexico calling me.*

In her PhD dissertation, Mary mentioned a critical incident which leaned her towards studying transnationals. When questioned about this incident, she responded as follows:

> *I had a contact with the SEP [Secretaría de Educación Pública, Ministry of Public Education in Mexico], and I had gone to this taller [workshop] where they had all the teachers from Programa de Inglés en Primaria [English Program in Elementary School] from all over the state. When I went there, it was really fascinating because all the transnational teachers were sitting together, and they were speaking English or they were code-switching back and forth. And so for me that was like, wow! There*

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> *is something here in terms of identity, and so that's really what made me want to study it. Subsequently, I found out that most or a lot of teachers in rural areas had learned their English as children in the U.S., and the family returned. It was a fascinating topic because you're in places like a little town in Nuevo Leon, but you find proficient English speakers there, and it's because of that whole transnational connection.*

Mary Petron can be considered a pioneer in the transnationalism field. She refers to transnationalism as "a state of mind, a unique state of consciousness which allows one to operate within and between different national, linguistic, and cultural borders without being subsumed by any one of them" (Petron, 2003, p. 6). To further elaborate on the concept, Mary expanded with the following:

> *A really important thing is that it feels like home. There is at the same time almost like a transnational culture. They [the transnationals] like being together. I will go back to the teacher meetings; they liked being together, and it was almost like a cultural bond that they had because of these experiences, because of the slang.*

The work of Mary Petron has been a forerunner in arriving to the construction of who a transnational is. She uses the term 'transnational' to refer to "those individuals who have considerable life experiences on both sides of the U.S. border, this definition includes objective factors such as years spent on both sides of the U.S. border and factors such as both sides feel like home" (Petron, 2003, p. 6). When questioned whether Mary considered anything else to add to the definition, she provided:

> *All the people that I studied, they essentially have two home bases. And so you have close family members in both places, and so there is this constant sort of flowing back and forth. I will give you the example of Nora. Nora lives in Nuevo Leon, but all of her siblings live in the U.S., and they come back a lot not just at Christmas. There is this back and forth movement all the time. Her daughter, the first time she went to the U.S., she was a teenager, but she knew a lot of English, and it was because of that constant interaction with cousins coming back. I would say it is essentially two home bases, they could go back and forth.*

Continuing on with the topic of transnationalism, Mary believed that there may be a possible issue with the different conceptions of transnationalism. She noted:

> *There are lots of different definitions of transnationalism. I think that one of the issues is that most often, it [transnationalism] is actually studied from the U.S. and how they [transnationals] maintain ties with Mexico, but it's not often studied from the perspective of those living in Mexico, and how they maintain ties with those they left behind in the U.S. There is this whole issue about the sending and receiving country. Looking at immigration, it's not clear sometimes what the sending and the receiving country is. What is interesting is that these individuals feel like it's home; both of them are home, and they don't want to give up either home.*

Along the conversation, the topic shifted to a stance in which Mary agreed to believe that transnationalism should be understood to exist along a continuum, in which there could be different degrees of transnationalism. With reference to Nora, an older American transnational English teacher in a small municipality in Nuevo Leon, Mexico, and Elvira, a

young Mexican transnational English teacher in a rural community in Nuevo Leon, Mexico, Mary specified:

> *Nora's dad, he didn't speak English. He didn't know how to read and write, but he spent almost all of his work life in the strawberry fields in California. They lived about three hours from the border, and every few months he would still have to go back to Texas because he wanted to go there and he wanted to eat sushi, or he wanted to buy things. There were things culturally about him that reflected his life in the U.S. He encouraged English amongst his grandchildren; he was like a patriot. He would talk sometimes to people who were thinking of going to the States, saying yeah, go! You can make some money there. And I'm not saying that it was easy, but for him it had been a good experience. One of the things he said was, yes, they treated me very badly in the U.S., but I was treated badly here too. He wasn't paid very much, but he was able to invest in a building rental homes.*
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> *The same with Elvira's dad. He said the same thing: it was terrible, but it wasn't good here either, and so at least I was able to give an education to my children. I was able to build a house, and I was able to do all of these things. And now he's retired, and they go back and forth.*

Moving along with the conversation, the topic was brought up related to how transnationals may be faced to confronting with a third space (Bhabha, 1994). Regarding this topic, Mary pointed out:

> *I think they [transnationals] occupy a third space. Part of the issue is we tend to define everything by nation-state; you are either Mexican or you are American. We look at transnational children. They are not just Mexican, and they don't feel just Mexican.*
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> *I think that part of the issue with the third space is this idea that a transnational is this, but we don't always have the language to be able to describe them. The third space is really where they're most comfortable. They hang out together as teachers because there was this sense of identity together.*
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> *I think that another important aspect, something that often times is not explored, is this whole issue of social class because it was also a third space in terms of social class. In the U.S. they [the participants of Mary's doctoral dissertation] were working class. Their parents worked in the fields. They had terrible jobs while they were over there, but they were middle class in Mexico. It wasn't a comfortable position, because they would often hear people say things, and so I think that's another aspect of the third space. Essentially it's a space between classes; you're one thing on one side of the border and you're another thing on the other side of the border.*

Continuing on with the topic on transnationals, Mary referred back to the belief she has about how transnationals have certain cultural and linguistic capital (Petron, 2003, 2009, Petron & Greybeck, 2014). She further elaborated on the topic:

> *On the U.S. side of the border, they [the participants] spoke dialects of English that would not be considered prestige dialects of English. Often times they knew a lot about the U.S., but they didn't know how to negotiate certain things that middle class people could do. On one side of the border, they would be seen as not having a lot of*

> *cultural capital; but on the other side of the border, with the notion that they acquired as a result of their heritage, whether they considered it their first language, or whether they considered both languages being their first language, it was valuable. So, the same English is valued on this side of the border, but not necessarily valued on the other side of the border.*

Further expanding on the conversation, Mary suggested that having certain cultural and linguistic capital would lead to a change in traditional funds of knowledge of the participants amongst her PhD research. She recalled:

> *They knew what to buy where, and that really is a fund of knowledge. They knew what to get fixed there. They knew how to negotiate the whole issue of registering your car in the U.S. They would just get the permit from Mexico, and they would just drive back and forth every six months, so they would re-register the car so they wouldn't have to pay import, and that is just an incredible amount of funds of knowledge. They would have a firm grasp even on something like the peso. They always knew how much the peso was worth… It was like keeping your savings in dollars because it was considered a steadier currency, and that's an incredible funds of knowledge to know that.*

Translanguaging was another aspect that Mary found peculiar of her participants, as well as those students with similar migration backgrounds. She went on to describe translanguaging as the following:

> *Translanguaging is relatively a new term; it comes from Ofelia Garcia (2009). That's actually her term. One of the things that she says, and I would agree, if you are talking about code-switching, you're really looking at it from the perspective of being monolingual in one language and being monolingual in another language; but when you say translanguaging, you're approaching it from a perspective of a bilingual identity.*
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> *It's more than just code-switching. It comes with it, the fact that you are bilingual, and that you are an insider to both languages. I think code-switching has a bad name on both sides of the border. Some call it hablar mocho or Spanglish. If you look at transnational families, the language of the family is switching back and forth, but you don't switch back and forth from the perspective of I'm monolingual in English or I'm monolingual in Spanish. You switch back and forth because it's part of who you are, and it's a bilingual identity, not a monolingual identity.*
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> *When translanguaging, the teachers didn't translate. They would say part of it in Spanish and then whatever vocabulary they were using or learning, so the kids had to listen to the English to understand what was going on. Otherwise, they couldn't get it. Now we're beginning to recognize that as a pedagogical tool, and recognizing that this is what Garcia says that these kids are bilingual. If you just speak to them in one language or speak to them in another language, you are missing out on the linguistic richness that they have… not getting the sum total. And that's what Garcia says, translanguaging is a bilingual identity.*

As the conversation continued, the topic of borderlands arose. Mary went on to discuss how borderlands may extend beyond physical borders. She mentioned:

> *Lidia, for example, was not from Texas; she was from Chicago. They went back and forth from Chicago, so the border was not from this little rancho [ranch] three hours from the physical border. It was by plane, so it's the meeting of cultures. It is the meeting of social classes, and it sort of goes back to this third space. You don't consider the physical border being your home, and so you don't live in the physical borderlands, but you do live in the borderlands because you're always going back and forth.*

Related to borderlands, Mary continued to explain how those submerged within them construct a fluid identity. She commented:

> *They could change back and forth. There were times when they interacted in Mexican society. They wouldn't necessarily know that they spent time on both sides of the border, the expression that we have in the U.S.: they were able to pass. They were able to be sort of just Mexican at times, or they were able to be just American at times. They were able to be both, and they were comfortable. They were probably more comfortable being both, but it doesn't mean that they could not switch back and forth and just kind of move in and out.*

Referring to transnationals becoming English teachers, the classroom in which they go about in their teaching is rather particular. Mary described the perspective that the transnational English teachers had when going about within their English teaching. She discussed:

> *When they taught English, they taught it from the perspective of these kids are going to the other side. It wasn't English for use in Mexico. It was these kids are going to the other side, so I need to teach them survival English. They need to know what to say when they're there so they would be able to blend. That was their perspective; they're going to go over there so I've got to prepare them. They would also do cultural lessons, but a cultural lesson coming from experience, not coming from a textbook.*

The conversation was coming to an end as it shifted to possible implications of researching transnational experiences and the roles that transnational English teachers may play inside the classroom. Mary provided the following:

> *First of all, I think that it gives a better understanding of cultural and language issues on both sides of the border. I saw that sometimes children were going back or were going into Mexican schools for the first time. It was a very difficult transition for them. Sometimes they were treated badly, and this was because the administrators don't really understand the lives on both sides of the border. I think that is what is the value of transnational research.*
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> *We have these blinders, think of the nation-state. You're Mexican or you're American, but you're not both. You can't be just American because you don't look like one. From the perspective of the U.S., I think Mexico does a much better job at recognizing the linguistic talent. The fact that they were getting these individuals who knew so much English, and training them to teach English in an area where they needed English teachers, they don't do that in the U.S. We have a massive shortage of bilingual teachers in the U.S., but we're "importing" them. If you foster that and recognize the language knowledge that already exists in the country that would do you well. Mexico*

> *just does a better job at recognizing that linguistic talent. I'm not saying that it is not difficult for the children when they come back here, but for the adults, we recognize that you do know English and you know it well. You know it better than others. So that's what I think the value is. It is also just shedding light on a population that exists that we can't just look at from either/or. Going back to translanguaging, you can't just look at this person being fluent in Spanish and being fluent in English, when in actuality it's both.*

Mary continued on to suggest possible research about transnationals in order to bridge some gaps. She suggested:

> *A lot of [transnational] children are coming into Mexico for the first time, and I think it's important to study that because I think that there is lots of misunderstanding of why kids do what they do. I think that by studying these kids, and fostering even more what Mexico already does, [we recognize] the linguistic talent that they bring into the classroom; I think a lot of times they're looked at as a problem because their Spanish isn't where it's supposed to be, or they don't read and write it very well. I think that there is an incredible opportunity in knowing how this would help benefit both education systems.*

Mary concluded the conversation with a final thought concerning transnationals, she mentioned:

> *I think that transnationals really are some incredible individuals. They are incredible for their knowledge, for their identities. It's almost like they themselves bridge the two countries, and so recognizing them as that bridge, they're just a wealth of information, but a lot of times nobody recognizes this.*

Mary Petron has been a pioneer in the field of transnationalism and transnationals. Her contributions to the field have been greatly appreciated. She has now shifted her focus of research to teacher preparation as she notices the importance of this topic in her current context. Her encouragement of those interested in the field was portrayed throughout the interview. I wish to thank her for her time, patience, and attention in allowing me to carry out this interview, for her openness and contributions to the field. I hope this interview may help those interested on the topic.

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